

The
FATHERLAND
Series



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WHO SEEKS ME HERE IN MY LONELINESS?—(Page 155.)

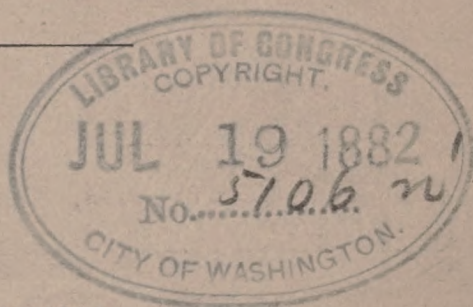
HILDA,
OR
GOD LEADETH.

By FRANZ HOFFMAN.

Translated from the German

BY

M. P. BUTCHER.



PHILADELPHIA:
LUTHERAN PUBLICATION SOCIETY.

1882.

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INQUIRER P. & P. CO.,
STEREOTYPERS AND PRINTERS,
LANCASTER, PA.

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HILDA.

CHAPTER FIRST.

TRAVELING SINGERS.

MASSES of gray clouds covered the sky, and the rain fell in torrents. A heavy mist enveloped the whole landscape, through which the unfortunate traveler could distinguish only the nearest objects; and a violent wind rushed, moaning incessantly, over the wide plain, catching the tops of solitary trees, and stripping them of the few leaves which the merciless Autumn had left upon them. The street, or rather road, a simple connecting link between the scattered villages of the broad heath, was almost impassable, being covered with deep, dangerous-looking tracks, filled with muddy water; here and there great hollows like little lakes overflowed even these, and the path was almost indiscernible. A

dreary road, and one sad to travel in such dismal weather.

In spite of all these disadvantages, a little wagon, drawn by a single horse, wearily and toilsomely moved along the road. It appeared to be heavily-laden, and presented a curious sight. A gray awning covered the top, and concealed most of its contents; but here and there, both before and behind, wooden poles peeped out, clothed in colored stuffs that were soaked with rain, and beyond all recognition of their original design. They were roughly painted, but in bright, glaring colors, and perhaps in times past had been intended to represent trees, bushes, houses, and different apartments in the last; but it would require a skillful and practised eye to distinguish a mass of rock from the group of trees, or the outside of a house from one of the rooms; for in many places the color had been washed away, and the design was certainly not that of an experienced artist.

In the fore part of the wagon, between the

masses of rumpled drapery, sat a man with black beard, and tangled hair, dressed in threadbare garments that afforded only slight protection against the inclemency of the weather. He leaned back, and kept as far as possible under the cover, but could not prevent himself from being deluged now and then with a shower of rain, as a turn in the road brought his wagon in the face of the wind.

Then he frowned darkly, and with an impatient exclamation shook himself like a spaniel. He held the whip and reins, and would beat the poor horse unmercifully if it stopped but a moment on the soaked highway to breathe and regain a little strength. The worn-out animal did his best, but could hardly stand. Again and again, with a faint show of spirit, he started forward at the crack of the whip and the rough call of his master, and struggled bravely through the mire and mud, that covered his body and legs with a thick crust which even the pouring rain could not wash off. At length he stood still be-

fore a wide yellow lake, and neither whip nor shouting could urge him one step onward. He drew his shoulders up painfully at each stroke of the whip, but stood still, and only shook his wet ears as though he would say: "No, no! Thus far and no farther! I can do no more than is possible!"

"Get on!" shrieked the driver from his wet seat, and struck the poor exhausted animal still more furiously. "Forward! forward! If we can only reach the other side of this mire, and get over the hill, the road will be better after that, and it is but a half hour to the village. Forward, Kleo! Forward! Just one more effort, and you will reach a stable, and have as much oats as you can eat."

The little bay horse pricked up his ears, certainly, at the sound of "oats," as though he really understood; yet, nevertheless, he stirred not from the spot. He made one feeble attempt to push forward, but seemed to feel that it was useless, and, drooping his head, he stood sadly as before,

while a violent gust of wind drenched the driver with a fresh shower of rain, that naturally did not improve his ill humor.

“Truly, this is a dog’s life!” he growled wrathfully. “And even worse, for a dog in his kennel has it better than this; he can at least keep warm and dry, and find something to eat. But we cannot stay here. Get up, Kleo! Forward!”

Again the whip cracked, and heavily the blows came down on the thin back of the unfortunate beast. He started—the mud splashed under his hoofs; dirt and water flew into the wagon, as the wheels creaked, and forward they went—but alas! after a half a dozen steps the poor creature again stood still, and turned his head sorrowfully, as though making a pitiful appeal for mercy to his cruel master. But no mercy was there; lashing himself into yet wilder fury, he again used the whip; the animal stood another beating patiently; his master might have seen that he could go no farther, had not his

rage blinded him to everything but the fact that they were making no progress in their journey. The limit of its strength was reached.

“Let him rest a little, Jonathan,” said a soft feminine voice, now from the inner depths of the wagon. “Poor Kleo! he can go no farther. We have already traveled five hours in the storm on this fearful road. Let him rest at least a half hour, then he will be a little refreshed, and able to carry us on.”

“It is well for you to talk,” returned the man in sullen tones. “You are under shelter, sitting on soft dry straw. But I—with this horrible storm—I am wet to the skin, even to my bones, and my limbs are stiff with the icy cold. We must go on! We are not a half hour’s ride from the village, and that far the unreasonable Kleo must hold out. Go on, Kleo! forward!”

But Kleo did not stir; with drooping head he stood, and whip and shout exercised their habitual work in vain.

“Stop! oh pray stop, Jonathan!” called out

the gentle voice entreatingly from within the wagon, as the man beat the horse with increased passion. "We will rather get out and wade through the morass till we reach solid ground. Only think, if we should lose poor Kleo, what a misfortune that would be to us! How could we get another horse? And how should we be able to travel without a horse? No, do not be angry, Jonathan; you cannot push the animal beyond his strength."

The sensible persuasion of the woman seemed to make some impression on the angry driver. He stopped beating the horse, and turned his face towards the interior of the wagon.

"You are right, Kathinka," he answered, "but this morass stretches out far before us—at least five hundred paces—and you will be soaking wet before you are through."

"Oh, that is nothing," answered the voice, "for we are already wet—the cover has not been much protection during the last heavy showers; so the sooner we reach the village the better, for then

we can dry our clothes. Let us get out now, and walk over the hill. Kleo can take us the rest of the way."

"Well, then, step out. For my part," grumbled the man, "I cannot become more soaked than I already am, so I might as well be out of the wagon as in it."

As he spoke, he sprang into the morass, which reached above his knees. Signs of life now appeared within the wagon. A slender, pale woman of perhaps thirty years came first. Heavy brown hair lay in soft chestnut waves on her temples, and her large, sad-looking eyes were of the same color. Despite the lines engraved by poverty and distress, her countenance still bore traces of former beauty; but a restless, wandering life had exhausted her strength, and she looked weak and delicate. Her clothing was as thin and scanty as that of Jonathan, her husband: a crushed looking hat, a threadbare black mantle, and a faded cotton dress that had been mended in many places, besides coarse woolen stockings, and

shabby, well-worn boots, constituted her whole attire. She took off her shoes and stockings before she descended, and jumped without assistance into the mud. "Come, now," she called back into the wagon, "the water is not as deep as it looks, and we are already wading through it. Wake up, Hans! And, Hilda, reach Kurt out to me; I will carry the poor little fellow under my mantle, and keep him as dry as I can."

As she spoke, a young man of about eighteen sprang out, followed by a young girl, holding in her arms a boy three or four years old, who fearlessly looked out into the storm with bright and clear blue eyes; flaxen curls clustered over his head, and his glowing face reminded one of a half-opened rosebud. He clung fast to the young girl, as though he did not wish to leave her, but she chided him kindly. "You must let go, Kurt," she said, with a voice so gentle and sweet that it sounded like a strain of music, "else I cannot jump out of the wagon; see, if we should attempt to go together, we would both fall in the

mud. Then we would look well, indeed! Go, for only a minute, to Aunt Kathinka. She will cover you with her cloak, and keep you warm and dry. Go, my pet."

The little boy could not resist the spell of her voice. He wound both arms still more tenderly around the young girl's neck, then loosed them, and stretched out his hands towards the older woman, who received him with motherly solicitude, and carefully covered him with her mantle, so that the rude winds could not touch him.

Now the young girl stepped lightly out, and glanced undismayed at the certainly not very encouraging prospect. She seemed scarcely sixteen years of age, with a face and figure so beautiful that not even the wretched garments she wore had power to conceal or spoil. Her expression was loving, bright, and innocent as a spring flower, and contentment smiled from her red lips and shone from her dark blue eyes. She also, like Kathinka, went barefoot, in order to save her shoes—the only pair she possessed; and bravely,

with the others, she struggled through the morass as fast as possible. But first she stood for a moment beside Kleo, and patted the poor animal caressingly on the neck. "Good Kleo! You have gone through much to-day," she said in her silvery tones that always reached the heart, "Is it not well that I still have some bread left from breakfast! You shall have it. There, eat, Kleo; I hope it tastes good. Yes, I know it is refreshing." She had taken a slice of coarse, black bread from her pocket, broken it in pieces, and held them out to the weary and half-famished horse. Hungrily he ate them, and a gentle neigh of gratitude spoke his appreciation of her kindness.

"Come, Hilda, hasten!" now called the woman, who had meanwhile gone on; "let Jonathan feed the horse. If you stand so long in the water you will take cold, and become hoarse, and then farewell to a good entertainment in the village. And no money in our pockets! Come!"

"Oh, I will not take cold," laughed the girl,

and began to sing in a clear voice through the rain wind, the first notes of a pretty little song; but stopped soon, and said, "Kleo must have his bread; then I will come." The food did not hold out long, for the piece of bread was not very large, and Kleo's mouthfuls not small; in less than two minutes he had finished his repast, and neighed once more in a satisfied manner, as Hilda again softly stroked his neck.

With light steps she hastened after the others, who were still in the midst of the morass, overtook them, and in a short time stood at the foot of the hill, over which the way led to the nearest village. Here the ground was firmer beneath their feet, and they waited now for Kleo to come up.

"Come, Kleo! come!" called Hilda, coaxingly. The spell of her lovely voice, or the short pause of rest and refreshment, or perhaps both, seemed to have the right effect; for Kleo had scarcely heard the call ere he drew himself up, splashed with a quick trot through the mud and water,

and without the aid of Jonathan's voice or whip, soon drew the wagon onward to where the party waited. Hilda took the bridle and led him easily over the hill, whose highest point was reached in a very few minutes.

"Now we are sheltered, and the worst lies behind us, good Kleo," said Hilda, clapping her hands with pleasure. "See, old fellow, there is the church steeple above the bushes yonder; and several red roofs already shining through the mist and rain. From here it is all down hill till we reach the end of our journey, so it will be much easier now. Give Kurt to me and climb into the wagon again, Aunt Kathinka! Mount, Hans; I will come in last; there! are you settled? Then shall I hand you my pretty boy; now I will come. We are all ready, Uncle Jonathan; and now," she reverentially added, "God grant that we may go on smoothly. Tramp, you dear horse, tramp, tramp, tramp! The stable is not far off now."

The last words she sang out in loud musical

tones; the horse started, the wagon rolled forward, the wind and storm seemed nothing now in the near prospect of shelter, rest, and refreshment. But it was not quite so easy as it seemed to run their little barque out of the sea of storm into the safe calm of the harbor before them.

"Halt!" said Jonathan, "halt, Kleo! We have reached the goal. Here is the inn of the 'Little Lamb,' where we will pitch our tent."

Kleo obeyed instantly, and with evident satisfaction. He stood motionless.

But Jonathan had not yet dismounted from the wagon, or even laid down the reins, when the form of a heavy, broad-shouldered man appeared, dressed in a peasant jacket, and wearing a gray cap upon his head. He planted himself before the wagon, and looked insolently under the cover. "Hey there, what is all this?" he called out in rough tones. "You look like traveling acting folks; what do you want here? Eh?"

"We would like to take lodgings with you, Herr Innkeeper, if you please," answered Jonathan, very meekly and humbly. "For at least a fortnight we would like to remain with you, and it will certainly be no loss to you. Let me first get out and take my horse to the stable; then we can talk further."

"Not so fast! do not attempt it!" answered the innkeeper, as rudely as before. "A regular pack of actors! Do you think I cannot see the poles and the colored curtains sticking out before and behind? I have no lodgings in my house for such as you. Travel on! I want nothing to do with you."

"But, Herr Landlord," said Jonathan entreatingly, "Think of the weather, and the poor horse—he is quite worn out. No! You surely will not be so cruel as to turn us from your door in a storm into which it is not fit for a dog to venture."

"Cruel or not, I will not let myself be taken in by such people as you," was the landlord's cold reply. "Have you money to pay for your

lodgings? If so, you can stay; if not, begone! Yonder is the road, and the world is wide. For my part, I do not care if you are out on the highway all night, so you do not stay with me."

"But my poor horse can go no farther. Look at him now!" returned Jonathan, earnestly. "You must keep us here, Herr Landlord, for just a single night!"

"Not for a night; not for a day; not for an hour, unless you pay me first for what you will use," said the innkeeper. "So either show me your money, or go at once, for I cannot stand out here in the rain any longer! Say quickly, have you money or not?"

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders; money was just the thing he had not; and his only hope of raising it was by giving an entertainment in the village. Now it seemed that all his prospects were to be spoiled by this hard-hearted landlord, who would not allow him to stay at his inn long enough even to earn money to pay for their lodgings. Perplexed and discomfited,

he cast down his eyes, and looked completely discouraged. He knew not what next to do or say to soften the heart of this greedy innkeeper. In the pause that followed the landlord's last speech, while Jonathan still in vain racked his brain for a new plea in their favor, Hilda suddenly moved out from under the cover of the wagon, and stood before the innkeeper, who, struck by her unexpected appearance and great loveliness, stepped backward, and stared in wonder.

"How," cried Hilda, with flashing eyes and glowing cheeks, "can you call yourself a Christian man, Herr Innkeeper, and yet are not ashamed to deny the shelter of your roof to destitute people in such weather as this? Is this the brotherly love that the dear God has bidden us practice one to another? If you close your doors against us, surely we will find one opened to us elsewhere; for there must be some compassionate hearts in this village! But you can plainly see we are at present able to go

no farther, and if you will not let us come under shelter, we must spend the night out in this pouring rain, under the open stormy sky. For the last time, I pray you, take us in. Will you do so or not?"

In spite of the bad weather, the dispute before the inn and the loud, angry voice of the landlord had drawn to the spot a little crowd of people. They stood around the wagon, and cast scornful looks at the miserable little group. As long as the landlord treated only with Jonathan, they showed by their manners and gestures that they approved of his rough dismissal of the poor acting people; but on the appearance of Hilda, a murmur of pity ran through the crowd, and even the hard manners of the innkeeper softened as he looked at the young girl, who with her beautiful angry countenance came like an accusing spirit before them.

"Well," he said at length, "if I could only feel sure that you would be able to pay but half of what I receive from other people, I might do

something for your sake, young lady; but to take in strange people, bag and baggage, knowing they have no money, is a little more than one can expect."

"The good Lord would not let you suffer loss for helping those who are in want," answered Hilda, boldly, and not in the least intimidated; "and you really would run no risk of receiving your pay; for though it is true we are poor singers, and have nothing at present, yet we will be able, by giving an entertainment in the largest barn that we can obtain, to receive money enough to more than discharge our debt."

The landlord still hesitated, but the people who stood around were all favorably impressed by the young girl's remarks.

"She is right!" said one of the crowd. "Let them stay here and have their entertainment! It is a good one: I saw it once in the town."

"Yes! stay here and play the piece," sounded now from another. "We will go to see it! Take them in, Stephen! It is fearful weather;

the poor people can really go no farther, and the night is coming on."

"It is easy for you to talk!" cried the keeper of the house. "You will lose nothing when after a while these beggars clear out."

"We are not beggars," said Hilda to the rude man, "we are honest people who earn our living by honest means, and have never yet deceived any one. Besides, to balance our debt with you, though we have no money, there is the horse and wagon, and you may take them if we cannot pay you; but that will not happen, I hope."

"If you only had but half the money!" said the landlord, still plainly in doubt whether it was best for him to take in the band of comedians or not. "No! no! it will not do! You must travel farther, people. You cannot stay here!" At this last harsh refusal Hilda's spirits deserted her. She clasped her hands together, and the tears came into her eyes.

"Oh! this is too hard!" now said a sturdy peasant, whose heart was touched by the friend-

lessness of the poor child. "The people cannot go on in such weather, and it would be an everlasting disgrace to the whole village if we could allow them to be thus pitilessly driven out. I will be responsible, Herr Stephen, for the payment, but you must take them in for to-night. They shall have at least one night's rest. So get out of your wagon, good folks; if the worst does happen, it will only be throwing a few dollars out of the window."

"That is well said, Conrad," now chimed in several other voices; "we too, will stand for them. Take the people in, Stephen, and let us for once have an entertainment in our village."

The turning tide in their favor reached also the rough landlord, now that his pocket-book was in no danger, and he too began to be quite friendly. "Well, if you mean it then, so it shall be," he said, "but you are responsible, Conrad, and you, Peter, and Schulze! I will not be laughed at behind my back for being taken in by the first soft voice that comes along."

“Yes, yes, yes!” cried the peasants together; and Hilda hastened to him who had first spoken, and seized his hard brown hand in hers.

“I cannot tell you how much I thank you, but God will reward you for your merciful words,” she said in her musical tones, that trembled with agitation, and won the hearts of all the rough peasants. “You shall not be deceived, kind people; we will give you our best programme, and I hope you will not be sorry for having stood by us.”

“No, indeed! we shall not be sorry,” answered the peasant, kindly; “but hasten, and let us see you at once under shelter, for you are quite wet, and your poor horse looks as if he could hardly stand. Poor fellow! How his ears droop! I will see that he has a couple of bags of oats.” •

“How good you are! I am very grateful to you!” cried Hilda so heartily, and smiled on the old peasant so sweetly that the others envied him, and would willingly have given something to receive for themselves such a glance.

"I will send you in a few eggs, so that you may have something warm to eat," said one. "And I a couple of sausages," said another; "And I a piece of ham!" cried a third; "I, a bag of potatoes," said a fourth; and Hilda clapped her hands with pleasure, and her face grew so bright at their good fortune, that they already felt more than repaid for their kindness.

"I thank you! Oh many times I thank you all!" she cried, bowing gratefully to the peasants. Then she moved quickly to the wagon; lifted out the little Kurt, and assisted the pale Kathinka to alight; and at last entered the inn, while Jonathan and Hans unharnessed the horse, and took him to the stable.

It was pretty soon evident that the peasants had not made bare, empty speeches. The gentle manner of Hilda must have made a great impression on them, for, before the little party had become settled in the rooms which the landlord had assigned them, came one messenger after another, and all with well-filled hands. Oats, eggs, milk,

bacon, sausages, ham, bread, butter and cheese were brought, and so abundantly, that Frau Kathinka said they could all live upon their provisions for a week at least, without spending a penny. The landlord, too, began to show more kindly interest in the wayfarers. Hilda's bright, brave courage had softened his heart. He certainly had not given them his best guest-chambers, but he had taken care that the beds provided for them were good and comfortable, though the rooms were extremely small.

About an hour after their arrival, he visited the travelers in their apartments, and now perceived that they had scarcely room to turn around in their close quarters; and felt something like shame when Hilda heartily thanked him for his scantily-fulfilled hospitality.

"But, odds!" he answered, "I see the comfort you will have here is not much to lose silver over! No! This must be differently arranged. You cannot all crowd together in these narrow little closets. I have several other rooms still

empty. Come, then, little lady, and choose which you will; you shall have it, and I will not charge you a halfpenny more for it. So come along."

Hilda was well pleased to accompany him, for they certainly were very much crowded in the two "closets," as the landlord himself had called them. The beds filled up the greater part of the rooms; a couple of boxes, containing various articles belonging to the party, and the kettles, dishes, bowls, and platters which held the gifts of the good country people, blocked up every available space. One could hardly take a step without treading upon something, and it was utterly impossible to bring anything like order out of the general confusion. Now the innkeeper took Hilda by the hand and led her upstairs to a beautiful room on the floor above. It was handsomely furnished; the bedstead and bureaus were of carved wood, a fine wardrobe stood on one side, and mirrors in gilt frames adorned the walls. Curtains hung before the windows, and a large

tree pressed its naked branches close against the panes, through which one could see plainly the little village, and the church-spire gleaming in the distance.

"Aunt Kathinka and her husband shall have this room," said Hilda, charmed with the happy change in her surroundings. "Hans can stay very well in the stable, and the lower rooms are more than enough for little Kurt and me. Indeed," she added, as she beheld an ominous change in the expression of the landlord, "Herr Landlord, I am very hardy, and have often slept on a bed of straw in a barn."

"Oho! nothing of the kind! That is not at all what I intend," answered the innkeeper "The others will stay below, and this room is to be yours. What do I care for that man and his wife! I do this to make it better for you; the others are nothing to me."

"Please listen! the poor woman is so weak and exhausted," pleaded Hilda. "I know it will make her well again to come into such a

pretty room as this. For me it does not matter ; I am young and healthy, and can put up anywhere. Good Herr Landlord, grant me this favor ; only let Aunt Kathinka have this room while we stay with you."

The landlord was not convinced ; it did not seem quite right to him, but what could he do ? The fair young girl with her charming ways coaxed him over to her side, and he finally said : " Well, have it your own way ; there is room in the next chamber for another bed, and a crib for the little curly-head, so you three may remain together ; but the man shall not come up here : it is good enough for him below. I do not like the looks of that Jonathan, as he calls himself ; is he your father ? "

" Oh no," said Hilda, with a little sigh ; " I am only a poor waif that has known neither mother nor father, as far back as I can remember. I have no claim on any one in the whole world, and no one to take my part, except perhaps Kathinka, who has never been harsh or unkind

to me, but instead, has often wept with me, and tried to comfort me, and console me."

"Console you! for what?—wept! over what?" asked the landlord in gentle tones. "Have you already in your young life suffered distress?"

"Ah, worse than that," said Hilda. "You are right, Herr; Jonathan is not a good man, and has often beaten me—beaten me, so that I have cried out with pain. Hunger and cold afflict one sorely enough; but it is far worse to be treated with harshness and cruelty."

"Poor child! poor child!" said the landlord, compassionately, "why then do you stay with these people? Why not leave them? It would be well if some kind Christian heart could be found to take you from them and protect you."

"Where, indeed, could I go, Herr?" asked the girl. "I know no one; no one knows me. Since my old nurse died, I stand entirely alone."

"What old nurse?"

"My good old Dorothy; she was always kind and loving towards me."

“Was she your mother, or a relative?”

“She was not my mother; I cannot even say whether she was related to me. She was always known to me as Nurse Dorothy. My dear, dear nurse! She knew more about me than I could ever discover, and many a time would utter vague mysterious speeches, that I could not understand, that for some especial reason it was necessary for me to remain in concealment. But she became suddenly very ill—so ill that she died in an hour; and then, before she died, she seemed very anxious to tell me something, but her tongue was paralyzed, and she never spoke again. So her secret, if there really was one, is buried with her, and who knows of what importance it might be to me?”

“Hem! certainly no one can tell that. But how came you with Jonathan? What have you to do with such a man?”

“Oh, that is easily explained. Nurse Dorothy and I lived at the time of her death in a little town on the border of Poland. After she was

gone, the register clerk came and looked through her property. He did not find much, only a few necessary household articles, her simple wardrobe, and her savings of a few dollars. My good nurse was poor, and she earned the little we needed to live on, by the labor of her hands—by fine needle-work and embroidery—she could embroider beautifully. Now that she was dead, the clerk did not know what to do with me. Jonathan was then in the town, playing comedy with his little company. He heard of me, sought me, and found me with the people who had for the present taken the orphaned, homeless child into their cottage; he begged the clerk to give me into his charge, and promised to receive and care for me as a father. I think they were all glad to get rid of me, for no one made any objections; and I was given over into Jonathan's hands, without further conditions, save the single admonition that he should behave towards me in a humane and Christian manner. So I came away with the actors, and though but a little child of seven

years, was taught to play little roles. So have I remained until now. Frau Kathinka has always been good to me, but Jonathan has held lightly with his conscience the promise to care for me as a father. He has treated me horribly, and has often struck me without the slightest occasion, when he has been in an ill-humor, and that was whenever things went wrong with him, which they often did, or he had not money in his pocket to supply him with drink; but now, since I have become old enough to think for myself, I do not allow him to treat me thus any longer. I have told him that I would run away if he still treated me so harshly, and he knows well that I really mean it. But, at its best, it is a sad, miserable life that we lead, and I would a hundred times rather be the least servant in a respectable house, than decked off in tinsel and gaudy finery, to play comedy before the people. Yes, through many sad days have we lived, and only God knows whether there are better or worse ones waiting for us in the future."

"But why do you not leave them?" said the innkeeper. "A modest, bright, and clever girl, as you seem to be, could easily find a situation."

"Not so easily as you think, Herr Landlord. People all have a prejudice against the poor, homeless, traveling actors, and no one will willingly take them into their houses. What do they know of me? Why should they think me better than the rest, when no one can read the heart? Besides, there is little Kurt! With my whole heart I love the helpless child; what would become of him without me? Frau Kathinka is too weak and sickly to take care of him, and Jonathan, I know, would not only neglect him, but consider him a burden. How then would the little one fare?"

"A burden! is it not his own child?"

"No; Jonathan was obliged to take him when his mother died. That, too, was a sad time; his mother was the sister of Kathinka, and played also with a troupe of actors, till she became sick, and could no longer go upon the stage; then

she wrote in great distress to Frau Kathinka, and begged her to take the little one if she should die; and soon after she died. Then, although Jonathan strongly objected, and would have nothing to do with it, Kathinka took the orphan boy to herself. It has already been the cause of much strife, but Kathinka, although ever yielding where only herself was concerned, remained firm in her resolution to keep the child, and he has been with us till to-day. I took the little boy as my charge, and have so won his love that I should hardly be able to leave him, even if I could find a more comfortable position."

"That sounds very well, but it is not right," said the landlord, with a shake of the head. "Every one must look out for himself, and it is foolish, for the sake of a stranger's child, to remain in poverty and distress, when you might perhaps find a home with good people who would treat you with kindness instead of cruelty and neglect."

"But it is also for the poor woman, the good Kathinka's sake," answered Hilda, "she is no longer able to sing or act well. If I should leave them, Jonathan could not earn any more money, and the weak, delicate woman would suffer still more. No; there is nothing else to be done; I must stay with these people; it is God's will. Frau Kathinka has always been good to me, and I will not prove ungrateful."

"Then may the dear Lord help you, maiden;" said the innkeeper, with emotion. "I wish you all the good that may happen; but it is quite clear that your heart has run away with your head. Now, make yourself comfortable up here, and I will send Frau Kathinka and the child to you."

He went, and Hilda began with quick, busy fingers to arrange the two rooms. When Frau Kathinka came up with the boy, she found everything prepared, and as she looked at the large, airy room, in its order and neatness, a little sigh came to her lips—"Oh, if we could but have it

this comfortable always!" She too longed for rest from this weary life of travel, of which she was heartily sick.

4*

CHAPTER II.

“WHOSOEVER RECEIVETH A LITTLE CHILD IN MY
NAME, RECEIVETH ME.”

EARLY in the following day, Jonathan began to arrange his stage in a neighboring barn, that fortunately just then stood empty, and was offered to him; and all of the little party assisted him industriously.

The wagon was unpacked, and the things in it carried to the barn, where Jonathan worked and hammered under the admiring gaze of all the youth and children of the village, who crowded around the open door to watch him. The same evening the first entertainment was to take place, therefore he had much to do. Hilda went busily to and fro, and when anything was wanted she must bring it from the inn, for the landlord, at first so rough and unyielding, could refuse

nothing at Hilda's request, and gave her willingly all in his power that they needed. Boards, stakes, nails, ropes, and whatever else was required he brought out, and often carried them with his own hands to the barn, that the work might go on still more quickly. So it happened that in the afternoon all was in order and ready for the expected entertainment. And when the time came, the peasants thronged in, bringing their wives and children, and completely filled the barn, till there was not room for one more. A couple of pieces of music, played on an old organ, did not sound as badly as one might imagine; then the curtain rose slowly to the ceiling. A background of the gaudily-painted curtains appeared, but the audience were not critical, and, although the stage effect was poor, and the scenery faded from its once bright colors to dim and indistinct outlines, the spectators thoroughly enjoyed the play; and the actors, especially Hilda, earned rich applause. She sang in a soft, sweet voice, and acted in so

natural yet touching a manner, that she brought tears to many eyes. At last, after much clapping of hands, she bowed for the last time to her admiring audience, and the curtain fell, while the peasants returned to their homes in high spirits, and perfectly satisfied with their evening. Jonathan, too, was pleased; although the price of admission was but a groschen, or fourpence, he had taken in a good sum of money, and the people of the village had begged him to stay a long time, and give them many more entertainments. And the landlord was satisfied, for he now became convinced that he would lose nothing by having these strangers in his house; for he was not only certain that they would be able to pay him, but his custom was also largely sought by the peasants, of whom many stepped in after the play to take a glass of beer, and sit around the fire while talking over the evening's performances.

Two weeks passed quickly away. Each night the comedy seemed better than before, and the

country people still filled the barn to overflowing; for the fame of Hilda's beautiful voice had spread over the surrounding country, and drew not only the peasants, but the more wealthy owners of property, and even the noble people, to the theatre; and they not merely with groschens, but often with dollars, paid for their admission.

Jonathan was delighted, and lost for the time his gloomy, morose expression. Hilda trilled and warbled as some wonderfully-gifted bird; the landlord, punctually paid, was polite and attentive, and the atmosphere seemed full of joy and sunshine—when suddenly a dark cloud cast its shadows over the prospects of the poor singers. Frau Kathinka, who had for a long time been failing in health, now became all at once very ill, and the first consequence was the cessation of all entertainments by the little company, for the role of their few pieces was no longer complete. Hilda was not sorry to be able to devote all her time and care to nursing the sick woman, but Jonathan relapsed at once into his dark mood, and

did not hesitate to show his disappointment and anger at the loss of time, which was money to him.

Instead of becoming better, the poor Kathinka grew rapidly worse; she became weaker and weaker, and a very short time from the day she was taken sick, Hilda wept heart-broken tears over her dead body. Jonathan stood by unmoved; he might have been a stone, for any sign of emotion that he showed.

"It is well that she is dead!" he said; "why do you weep, Hilda? She was always weak and sickly, and now she is free from all misery in this life."

Hilda made no answer; she only wept still more violently—her only friend was gone. She mourned bitterly for the poor heart that had found so little happiness in life, and at whose death her husband did not even make a pretense of grief.

"Cease this foolish noise!" began Jonathan again, after a short time, and caught Hilda by the arm. "We have now other things to do than to

bewail the dead! Listen to me. We must arrange our plans."

The girl answered him not. Indeed, she scarcely heard what he had said to her. Impetuously Jonathan drew her away from the silent figure on the bed, and with astonishment and displeasure visible in her face, Hilda lifted her swollen eyelids and gazed at the unfeeling man.

"This is but silly behavior," he said; "here, sit down by the window, and pay attention to what I have to say to you."

Hilda sat down mechanically, clasped her hands over her heart, and raised her eyes, not to the rough man before her, but only to fix them again on the calm face of the dead woman. Jonathan leaned forward, and went on in a low, guarded voice:

"Hilda, you have so much common sense that you must see exactly how we are situated. We can no longer play our roles since Kathinka has failed us, and we must think of some way to earn money. We can stay here no longer, but must

depart secretly in the night, and this very night, too; for if, in my circumstances, I should pay the funeral expenses of the Frau, then I would lose all the profits of the last two weeks, and we would be just as poor as before. Let the village community look after the funeral. They will surely bury her without my presence."

Hilda clasped her hands painfully together. "You are a bad man, Jonathan," she said.

"Bad or not," he replied, "the living must be cared for; while the dead—they need nothing more. As for you and me, we will quietly go away to-night. I hope you are satisfied that it is the best thing we can do. I have planned it all, and will take you where you can earn money enough for us both without great trouble. A comrade of mine plays with his company in Silesia; we will go to him; I know he will be glad to take us."

Hilda shook her head. "I will not listen to it! We must not deceive the good people here," she replied earnestly, and with decision.

"They have been very kind to us. Shame on you, Jonathan, if you go away in this manner! Besides, it would not be such an easy thing to do. How would you attempt it? How could you take your horse and wagon away secretly?"

"Oh, you foolish child, I would not think of doing that," answered Jonathan, with an unpleasant laugh. "But that part is all settled; I have already quietly sold the horse, wagon, and all the stage belongings, under the pretext that I needed the money to pay for the funeral expenses. A good-natured, stupid peasant has just let himself be taken in, and paid me the money for them. Until that becomes known, we are safe; and once off, it will be a long day before they will see us again."

Hilda shuddered, and drew herself farther away; she could hardly conceal the loathing she felt for the man, who could deliberately plot such wickedness.

"So you have arranged it all, then," she said after a time, during which she had tried to con-

trol her agitation; "well, it may be easy to accomplish, but how will you settle it with your conscience, Jonathan? Your actions cannot affect me very much, but what will become of Hans, and, before all, of your nephew, little Kurt? How can you carry the child away without being seen? By means of him you will be easily traced: and what then? No, Jonathan; give up your bad intentions, and let us trust that God will help us now, as he has hitherto done."

"Madness!" cried Jonathan, "the creed of the world is that 'God helps them who help themselves.' What do you mean? Do you imagine that I intend to be burdened with Kurt? While my wife lived, I was obliged to keep him with us, but now all that is over. Let what will happen to the child. I shall not trouble myself with him. Only you and I must go off together. The rest may look out for themselves."

Hilda grew pale; the heartlessness of Jonathan frightened her; but she recovered herself, stood up, and looked indignantly at him with her

clear, bright eyes. "Once for all, Jonathan," she said firmly, "I will never leave the helpless child, who is now, but for me, quite alone in the world, since God has taken away the only other heart that was good to him. And, farther, I will not hear to it that you shall secretly steal away, and so wickedly betray the confidence of these people. You must attend to the burial of your wife, as is proper and becoming. If you do not agree to this, I will go immediately to the landlord, and tell him what you have so basely planned. Think a moment, Jonathan, and then tell me that you will do what is right. You know me, and can understand that I am not saying what I do not mean to fulfill."

"But, Hilda, you exaggerate; it is not so bad!" answered Jonathan, who could hardly restrain his anger at being thus opposed, and yet found it necessary to appease the young girl. "Be quiet, and listen to me. You and I could easily make our way in the world; but my comrade will never take us in if we go to him bur-

dened with the care of a little child. Hans is large and strong, and can readily find a place around here as stable-boy, or something better, perhaps. But Kurt—any one here will take him in; certainly they will not let him starve. What can you be thinking about? He has no more claim on you than on the country people here, and it would really be a great misfortune for you to have him on your hands. You have talents, and can in time become a celebrated singer; but if you take that youngster, everything fails, for you will not have the time to attend to him, and you can go nowhere without him.”

“For all that I will never leave him,” returned Hilda. “I would rather beg my bread from door to door; rather walk barefoot through these snowy roads, or in hot dusty streets; rather suffer myself hunger and thirst, than desert this little friendless child. I promised the woman who lies dead before us to watch over Kurt, and always care for him; and with God’s help, I will keep my word. Besides, if I had not promised,

it would be my pleasure and duty all the same, and nothing could turn me from it. This is all I can say, Jonathan, and it is enough. Will you act as an honest man, or not? It depends upon yourself, whether you willingly do so, or whether the landlord shall compel you to it."

Jonathan ground his teeth with rage, but dared no longer give full sway to his passion, for he feared Hilda, and knew she would without hesitation inform the landlord of his proposed flight if he did not seem to agree with her, and pretend to give up his plans. "Well then, you foolish child," he said, reluctantly, "of course there is nothing for me to do but stay; but you will rue the power you use over me to-day. The funeral will swallow up all the money that we have made, and then we shall be again nothing more than beggars. You might have it very fine, Hilda. My comrade in Silesia would receive you gladly, and engage you at a good salary. Then you might live splendidly, and at ease, wear handsome clothes, and visit many cities; and in time it would be

still better. But with the child, what will become of you? He will even now swallow half of your earnings; and when he is larger, his maintenance will be a heavy burden that your shoulders will not be able to bear. Be wise, Hilda; leave the burden where it is, and go with me."

"No!" repeated Hilda again, "he and I shall remain together, and he will share my last mouthful of bread. Have you no shame yourself, Jonathan? Kurt, poor little fellow, is the child of your wife's sister, and you are his nearest if not his only relative; it is properly your duty to care for him, and you would not only desert him yourself, but would even, if it were in your power, persuade me to leave him to the cold charity of strangers! But enough! unless you promise to stay and fulfill your duty, I keep my word, and go directly to the landlord."

"Yes, yes, I promise," said Jonathan, "but you will soon enough be sorry for your decision. Very well, let it be as you say; you must bear the consequences of your obstinacy."

With these words he left the room, without even a glance at the earthly remains of his dead wife. Hilda looked upon him sadly, but satisfied that she had done all she was able.

“But he is a wicked man!” she said to herself. He means well neither to the child, nor to me. All is for his own ends. Poor Kathinka! happy are you to be free forever from his harshness! Surely God has taken you to the eternal bliss of Heaven—you who have suffered so much on earth.”

She knelt again beside the bed, and prayed for grace and strength to fulfill the charge left to her, and arose refreshed, as though a higher power than her own upheld her. The future she left in God's hands. Of Jonathan she thought no more; she believed he would keep his promise to stay until after the funeral, and so dismissed him from her mind.

The next day was that of the funeral. All were assembled in the parlor of the inn; the coffin was locked; the bearers, several kind-hearted peasants, stood ready, awaiting the setting

out, and a number of villagers were prepared to accompany the poor woman to her last resting-place. Hilda wept silently in a corner of the room; all eyes but hers were fixed expectantly on the door. Jonathan had not yet appeared. The clock on the mantel ticked the minutes slowly away; the hour had passed at which the little procession was to start.

“There must be something wrong,” at last said the landlord, after they had waited some time. “I will go to his room and bring him down.”

He went to the door of Jonathan’s room and knocked; there was no response. Impatiently he knocked again, and more loudly; still no sound from within. He turned the knob, the door opened without resistance, and a single glance showed the landlord that it was empty. With an expression of astonishment he entered, and looked in every corner, but found no sign of Jonathan. At last he perceived a piece of white paper on the window-sill; he took it up quickly, and read the few lines that were hastily scrawled upon it.

"Oh, the scoundrel!" he cried out. "I always thought he had an evil countenance. Gone off! Well, he has played me a sharp trick indeed!"

Crimson with anger, he returned to the parlor. "We need not wait longer," he said to the peasants. "Listen to what the rascal has written."

"*My Dear Herr Landlord,*" he read from the paper. "I have just enough money to enable Hans and myself to travel to a town where we can find good situations. I hope you will care for the funeral of my wife, as all the arrangements have been made. Do not trouble yourself to follow me, for while you are reading these lines, we are already many miles away.

"You may tell Hilda that she will now have time to repent of her folly in not joining me, as without my help she travels through the world with the burden of Kurt on her shoulders. Farewell, Herr Landlord. Good health to you!

"JONATHAN."

"Shameful! Contemptible! Heartless and abominable!" cried the peasants in chorus.

Hilda, pale and agitated, leaned against the wall; this unexpected blow was almost more than she could bear. A feeling of horror overpowered her, as she realized that she now stood alone in the world. But after a few minutes her old brave spirit re-asserted itself, and she lifted up her head with fresh courage. Jonathan had himself broken the tie that bound them together. She was free. She stepped up to the landlord.

"Herr Landlord," she said, "pray believe that I am innocent of this treachery. Jonathan has been false to his promise to me; but that is nothing. God will help the child and me. Only the poor wife! Have pity on her dead body. Let her have a respectable burial, and I will work for you until I have repaid all the expense. Surely, God will take pity on us, poor orphaned children!"

The innkeeper and the peasants looked compassionately on the young girl, who stood before them with tears in her eyes; and all hastened to reassure her.

“Be satisfied, poor child,” said the landlord. “None of the arrangements shall be altered; the funeral shall go on just the same. Thank God, our village is not so poor that it cannot stand the expense of the burial. Let us start, good people; we will carry the poor woman to her resting-place; and then we will see what is next to be done.”

The bearers raised the coffin, and placed it on their shoulders. Hilda, still weeping, followed them; the innkeeper walked by her side, and the peasants came after them. To the earth was given what now belonged to the earth; a little mound was raised above the heart that beat no longer, and Hilda fell on her knees beside it. The peasants with sympathetic glances left her, and returned to their work in the village. An hour later she came back to the inn with drooping head and swollen eyelids. She sat down in her room, and Kurt greeted her joyously, then returned to his play at her feet, while Hilda with anxious thought wondered what she could do

next. She felt very sad and lonely; she had no money, and knew she must find some means of earning enough to support Kurt and herself. The boy played on carelessly and happily, unconscious of her distress. His merry laugh broke in upon her dreary self-communing. "Poor child!" she murmured, "what will become of us! We have no claim upon any one in the world. We have no home, no money, no friends. But One watches over us; we have a heavenly Father! Yes, he is our friend, and will guide us, and keep us from harm."

She took the boy on her lap, and pressed him tenderly to her heart; her tears fell, and shone like diamonds on his curls.

"Why do you cry, Hilda?" he asked, and looked up wonderingly with his great blue eyes. "Has Jonathan been beating you? The wicked man! Only wait till I grow big; then he will never dare to touch you! I will buy a sword, and will guard you as the page did the beautiful princess you told me about the other day."

"You are my own good little boy," she answered. "No, Kurt, Jonathan will never trouble us again; he has gone away, and will not come back."

"That is good!" cried the child, clapping his hands with delight. "But you will not go away, Hilda, will you? you will always stay with me, and never leave me?" he asked anxiously.

"No, never, I promise you," returned Hilda with quivering lips. "Whatever happens I will stay with you; we will never be separated."

"Oh, then all is well!" replied the child, and smiled up at Hilda in perfect content. "Now you must not cry any more, or look sad. Why do you, Hilda? Are you not glad that Jonathan has gone away?"

"Yes, Kurt, but we are so poor and desolate; what will become of us?" said Hilda, unconsciously giving words to her thoughts.

"What the dear God wills, that we must accept," repeated little Kurt, as if saying a lesson. "How often you have said that to Aunt Kath-

inka! Have you, then, forgotten our good Lord, Hilda? He always helps his children, and you often tell me that we are his children."

The child repeated only half understandingly the words he had heard Hilda use in time of trouble to his aunt, but they came full of comfort to her, and lifted her out of the depths of despondency into which she was fast sinking.

"You are right, Kurt," she said. "I will not cry any longer; I will be strong and brave, and trust in God's help. Go on with your play now, and be happy, and I too will find pleasure in the thought that the dear Lord will lead us in whatever paths he may think best."

She placed Kurt again on the floor, and he returned to his play as merrily as though nothing had happened.

"Happy child!" she thought, "he as yet knows nothing of suffering, and care, and sorrow; he enjoys the present in blessed unconsciousness of trouble. God grant him many such merry, childish, and fearless days."

While Kurt piled up the pieces of wood and little stones into fantastic shapes, Hilda again busied her thoughts with the future. How could she begin? What ought she to do? These were the questions to which she sought in vain a satisfactory answer. She had learned nothing during her wandering acting-life but what a kind-hearted minister in a country town had taught her; that was not much, for Jonathan had remained but three months in the town; still, at least, she had learned concerning God and his commandments. The good old minister had taught her well; he also had been able, for she was bright and intelligent, to teach her reading, writing, and some arithmetic. But beyond this she understood nothing. She could sing, and play comedy, but these were now the least useful of all accomplishments to her.

She thought a long time without finding a way out of her difficulty, and finally concluded to ask the innkeeper's advice. Perhaps he might know of a situation for her.

She went to him, and the landlord listened to her with interest, but still shook his head thoughtfully.

"I have been thinking of you," he said. "Yes, I have had you much in my mind, and have spoken of you to one and another of the people about here, and asked their advice, but we can come no nearer to a decision than yourself, you poor child. You are not strong enough to undertake heavy work, yet I would willingly keep you here, and let you take care of the poultry, and have some other occupation, but I do not wish to keep the little boy on my hands. Our village is not wealthy, and we cannot support the children of strangers. But that need not trouble you; if you can tell us where the boy really belongs, and who are his nearest relatives, we can perhaps find means of sending him to them. But if you will not be separated from him," as Hilda firmly shook her head, "then you must take him, and go farther. Do you know nothing of his family, Hilda?"

"Nothing," answered Hilda. "I remember the place from which we brought the child when he first came to us, but know nothing more."

"That is bad!" said the landlord; "then I fear there is only one thing for you to do, and that is to go back to the same place, and inquire of the people living there if they know anything of the boy's family. If they can give you any information concerning the child, it may be well for you both; but if not, then you are still left even as you are now. Have you any recollection of your own home, child? A landmark, or association of any kind?"

"Nothing; or what really amounts to nothing," said Hilda, sadly; "Jonathan may have had anything belonging to me left when my nurse died; but he is far away, and I may never see him again."

"Bad, bad!" said the landlord, again shaking his head. "Then there is nothing left besides what the village judge recommends. Do you know the name of the place in which you lived

with your old nurse, when you were a child? —the place from which Jonathan first took you away?"

"Yes, I remember that! It is the little town of Gerschowitz, on the Polish frontier, in the large Dukedom of Posen."

"Well, then, child, thither must you go; it is the best that you can do," said the landlord. "It is a long, long way, and will be doubly hard if you insist upon taking the little one with you. He will be a great burden to you."

"Oh, no, indeed!" said Hilda. "The poor child has no one but me. My heart would bleed for his tender childhood. I could not desert him! God has given him into my care, and I will be faithful to the trust."

"That is all very good and brave, but it is not wise," said the landlord. "But that is your own business. Yet I would advise you to try to obtain some information in regard to his relatives. They may be well-to-do people, and may give him a home, and perhaps also find a good situa-

tion for you. And that would be better for you both than to lead this wandering beggar life. Yes, do that, child! Do you know his father's name?"

"Yes; but he died even before the poor mother. His name was Müller."

"Müller; that is not much to know in this particular case, for there are so many people in the world that bear the same name that it will be hard to find the right family. Yet you must try it. From what place did you bring the little one?"

"From Striegau, in Silesia."

"Well, then, you must go there at once and make inquiry. We will take care that you reach the place, and also that you come to the little town on the Polish border. The village clerk will make out a pass for you, and write on it a few lines in your favor. With it you must try to get through."

Poor Hilda! But she must rest satisfied with this scanty generosity, for she could do no better, and must be grateful that she was not held re-

sponsible for the debts that Jonathan in such a shameless manner had left behind. She thanked the landlord for his interest and advice, and promised to follow the latter part of it. The inn-keeper was pleased with her quiet submission, and filled with compassion at her forlorn, desolate position.

“You must not be in a hurry,” he said. “No, no; stay here a few days, and rest a little from the fatigue of nursing the sick woman. I am glad to have you stay, for I pity you from the bottom of my heart, and it grieves me much that I cannot help you.”

Hilda let herself be persuaded to remain a little longer, for she felt weary and depressed—and it was not strange. She had slept but little during the last days: the grief and excitement through which she had passed had left their traces on body and spirit. It was well that she did stay, for her sad and helpless situation moved the hearts of the villagers, and many little gifts were presented to her, that proved very useful in

the days to come. Little Kurt, too, was comfortably fitted out with warm clothes; and so many little contributions of money found their way into Hilda's purse, that she ventured to hope she would be able to travel at least as far as Silesia without soliciting the charity of strangers.

Three or four days later she packed her few things into a bundle, paid a last visit to Kathinka's grave, and bade farewell to the good villagers who had so kindly treated her. Unwillingly, they said "Good Bye" to the lonely maiden, and many sympathizing hearts followed her with blessings and good wishes as she set out on her long, wearisome journey. The old innkeeper who had received them so rudely, and only through the entreaties of the peasants had been induced to take them in, stood with tears in his eyes in the doorway, and pressed Hilda's hand as warmly as though she were his daughter.

"God knows, my heart is sore, that I am not able to keep you," he said; "but we in the village are not rich people, and must give the

little we can spare to help our own poor kinsfolk, who have come honestly through the world, and yet are often unfortunate, and in need of assistance. But I would willingly give you a light position were it not for the little one there. I fear he will be much in your way. But remember this, Hilda; if you find his relations, and they take him in, and the world goes not well with you, you must come back here; let happen what will, we will surely find a shelter for you, and you shall not suffer from hunger. And now may the dear God keep you always as good, honest and brave as you now are, and give you all good luck on the journey!"

"Thank you, Herr, thank you!" answered Hilda through her tears, and tried to smile hopefully; but her heart was heavy, and she looked forward to the future with fear and dismay. "What God has designed for me, he will fulfill. I must not complain; he will surely bring me out safely in the end. A thousand thanks for all the goodness and kindness you have shown me

and the poor woman who is in her grave. May the Lord repay you for it; and now farewell; farewell, dear people!”

She burst into tears, and, taking little Kurt up in her arms, she hastened away, bearing also the bundle containing the charitable gifts of the villagers. She walked quickly forward in the face of a cold north-east wind, that chilled her and did not raise her spirits. She could not help the sobs that would break out, as she moved on her way, so alone in the world; but faith still lingered in her heart, and kept her up—a firm faith in Divine Providence; and with this faith to lighten her path, and strengthen her weak steps, she traveled forward.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE JOURNEY.

A RAW, disagreeable December morning looked down upon the earth. As far as the eye could see, heavy clouds covered the sky, and not a break was visible, through which a ray of sunshine might penetrate to the cold earth. An unbroken sheet of snow about a foot in depth spread itself over the sleeping fields, meadows and woods, wrapping them as in a gigantic shroud. Here and there, at long intervals, a church-spire gleamed out, breaking the monotonous flatness of the scene—the only evidence that this part of the country was not entirely left to solitude and the elements. No living creature showed itself, save a raven that with rapid flight swept over the plain. Neither horse nor wagon appeared on the highway that led to the distant village. It wound along like a dingy

thread through the dazzling snow-drifts. Not far from the road, and somewhat aside from it, stood a low, uninviting little hut; a roughly built place, without windows, and covered on top only with straw; it had apparently been used by the mowers in summer, as a place in which to keep their tools. Now, in winter, it seemed quite deserted. But it was not; as the gray dawn cast its twilight shadows down, the little wooden door of the hut was opened from within, and a young girl stepped out into the open air, and looked up anxiously at the cloudy sky, then down upon the deep snow-drifts that lay at her feet. The prospect of the weather did not seem to please her, for she shook her head sadly, and a heavy sigh passed her lips.

“Another dreary day!” she murmured. “Poor little Kurt is hardly able to go on, yet we must try to reach the nearest village, if we would not perish with hunger and cold. Oh it is so far! so far! I can scarcely see the tower that stands out like a black speck in the snow. May God grant

us strength to reach it. I feel almost frozen, and tired to death!" Suddenly she paused, and stood listening by the open door.

"Hilda!" a whimpering voice from within called. "Hilda, where are you? I am hungry, and so cold! Do not leave me alone!"

"Poor child!" sighed Hilda, "at his tender age to suffer cold and hunger! and I have nothing now but a piece of dry bread. Well, it will be enough for him; and we—I must wait till we meet some charitable people. The child shall come first."

Again the plaintive voice called her name, and she hastened into the hut. It was quite dark inside; only a faint light came in through the door that now stood open, and showed little Kurt, who lay buried up to his neck in a mound of hay, and was softly weeping. He stretched out his arms to Hilda.

"I am so cold and hungry!" he said.

"Wait, wait!" answered Hilda, cheerily, "see, here is some bread! It will satisfy your hunger,

and when you begin to move about, and we are again on the way, I hope you will grow warm."

Kurt seized eagerly the piece of bread that Hilda held out, and devoured it with evident enjoyment: he did not leave a single crumb. Now Hilda took him in her arms, and tried to warm him by holding him close to herself. She succeeded, or perhaps the child had been more hungry than cold; for he looked up at her and smiled quite brightly again.

"Oh, the hay was not so bad, Hilda: now, though, you must eat."

"I have already eaten, Kurt," she answered, with a faint smile. "Let us go on, that we may reach a village before another night. You will be glad to sit in a warm room once more, you poor child; will you not?"

"Yes, indeed!" answered the boy, starting up. "Let us go at once; why do we stay in this cold, dark hut?"

"We will not stay longer now," said Hilda,

but do you not remember that yesterday you could go no further, and I too was tired, and the nearest village lay so far off, that we must thank God that we found even this poor little hut to protect us from the snow and the night air? It was much better to sleep under a roof and in the clean hay, than outdoors, to lie under the open sky, on the cold white snow: was it not?"

"Oh, yes!" said the boy, "but why must we still ever be going farther? Why can we not stay in some village till the winter is over, and the sun is warm again? I am tired of traveling, Hilda; I cannot go on!"

"Yes, you can, Kurt. Just a little farther to-day. We must go on. We are poor, helpless, and without friends," said the young girl sadly, "no one will take us in; but only have patience, Kurt; when the distress is greatest, then is the dear God nearest. We have not very much more to endure: soon we shall reach the town where I hope to learn something of your father: he surely must have had friends and relatives some-

where, and we will not rest till we find them. They cannot help taking pity on you, poor child, and as for me—what the good Lord wills may happen. But we talk and talk, and that does not help us on. We must go forward and make inquiries. Are you able to run again, little boy?"

"I will try it, dear Hilda; my feet are still sore from yesterday, but I know we must go on."

He raised himself with Hilda's assistance out of the hay, and stood entirely dressed on the floor of the hut. Hilda brushed off the little pieces of hay that still clung to his clothes, smoothed his hair, and put on his hat, tying it down with a narrow ribbon, a gift from one of the villagers, that the rough wind might not carry it away. She then took him by the hand, and they left the hut together, and turned into the highway. They reached it with a few steps, and now their nearest goal lay towards the church-steeple, which seemed to beckon them on with a friendly gleam through the frosty morning.

Little Kurt held out bravely for an hour, and waded uncomplainingly through the snow, which in many places reached above his knees. Hilda cheered him by her praises, and patted his pale cheeks caressingly, but it was hard work; the wading through the heavy snow exhausted his strength, and the poor little fellow had not much in the beginning.

He soon began to walk unsteadily, then staggered, reeled, and would have fallen if Hilda had not held him firmly up.

"I cannot go on," he said at last, and began to cry. "My feet are so heavy I can scarcely lift them."

Hilda sighed, and glanced regretfully at the church-tower that still shone at a distance. "Courage, dear Kurt," she said. "We dare not stop. Only think of the warm room, and good supper! Let us take breath, and try once more."

A block of granite lay in the road near them. She took Kurt in her arms, carried him to the stone, and sat down; the child nestled closely to

her; she spread over him the little cape that had afforded her but scanty protection from the weather, and tried to warm him at her heart. Kurt smiled up at her gratefully, then closed his eyes with a tired yet restful expression, and in a few moments was sound asleep. A tear dropped from Hilda's eye on his unconscious face.

"Sleep well, and rest, dear child," she murmured. "You may for a little time, at least, forget your distress; it is enough for me to find it so bitter. How unfortunate we are!"

As she sat and thought, her eyelids slowly drooped; but she tried to rouse herself, and looked at Kurt several times to see if he had awakened, that they might go on; but with her arms around him, and his head on her breast, he slumbered softly on, and she could not bear to waken him, so let him sleep; at last she too nodded, then slept. But the wet, cold snowflakes falling in her face mercifully restored her to consciousness.

"How wrong!" she exclaimed, "I have al-

lowed myself to sleep. Kurt must have the shelter of a roof to-night, or he will be sick, and I too. Oh, hunger, go away! We must hasten on—faster—faster.”

She looked at the boy; he had just opened his eyes.

“Do you think you can stand, Kurt?” she said. “Will you try to walk now?”

“Yes, I believe I can. How nicely I slept on your shoulder, Hilda! So much warmer and better than in the hay. But, see, it is still snowing.”

Surely it snowed, and, alas! so fast and thick came the flakes, that in a few minutes Kurt and Hilda were enveloped in a snow mantle. A cutting wind stung their faces, as they pressed onward again, and made their hard journey still more toilsome and unpleasant. At first Hilda felt the bitterness of the weather but little, for the sleep that had overcome her on the cold stone had left her chilled and benumbed, and the exercise necessary for their struggle through the snow-drifts started the blood again in her veins,

and partially warmed her. But Kurt soon complained of fatigue, and of the bleak wind which he could scarcely resist. In another half hour he completely gave out, and fell, sobbing, down in the snow. Hilda wrung her hands in grief and anxiety. She knew only too well the danger of their situation. If they could not reach the village before nightfall, they were both lost, for they would certainly perish with hunger and cold. And from such a fate she shrank back shuddering.

“Dear God, please help and strengthen us!” she whispered, looking up with clasped hands. Then she listened, for a clattering sound came to her ear, suddenly, through the storm and wind. She lifted her head, and stood breathless with delighted surprise. Yes, she had not deceived herself; it was the sound of wheels on the snow; the neighing of horses; the jingling of bells! A wagon was coming along the highway, and must soon overtake them. God had sent help in her great, great need.

Nearer and nearer sounded the wagon; she could now see the horses, as they came on with rapid tread. "Help! help! in God's name, help!" she cried loudly, and stretched up her arms imploringly towards the wagon; but as a shadow blown away, the team passed before her, and the next minute had disappeared amid the whirling snowflakes, and the jingling bells and the clattering wheels died away in the distance. The driver seated within his wagon had either not heard and seen her, or he was selfish and cruel, and would not stay to rescue them from the peril in which they found themselves.

The frightful disappointment to her hopes seemed to benumb poor Hilda; with a cry she sank on her knees in the snow, and despondingly clasped her hands together. Courage and strength seemed at last to desert her; and she was hardly conscious of anything till the pleading voice of Kurt recalled her to action.

"Do not cry, dear, good Hilda," said the child, and put his weak arms around her neck.

"Do not cry; I will go on, and will not complain of being tired; only do not cry, dearest Hilda."

"You are right, Kurt," she said, recovering herself once more. "We dare not doubt, but must believe that God will help us. Come, come! the raven and the swallow have their nests, and the pitiful God will also lead us to shelter. Hold fast to my hand. Now let us go; we must reach the village; we will pray as we go that God will let us find it."

With renewed energy she hastened forward so quickly against the wind and snow that little Kurt broke down again in a few minutes.

"Leave me, Hilda!" he sighed, breathless with his exertions. "I cannot go on. Let me lie here, and you go farther alone; you will soon reach the village without me."

The faint voice of the child, and his quiet yielding, struck terror to Hilda's heart. With tears running down her face, she bent over him, and put her arms around him.

“Leave you! never, never!” she cried. “Whatever fate is in store for us, shall find us together. I am strong yet, and fresh; I will carry you. Be quite still; only put your arms around my neck, and lay your head on my shoulder—so. Now you will see how quickly we go forward!”

But Hilda only too soon perceived how very much she had overrated her strength in the excitement of the moment. It required a strong effort even to stand up with the weight of the boy on her back, and the wading through the snow in the face of the wind almost immediately exhausted her little remnant of strength. She was compelled to stand still and rest at intervals that became shorter and shorter; she could scarcely breathe. Then, too, the poor girl had eaten nothing the whole day; the cravings of unsatisfied hunger preyed upon her, and she grew weaker and weaker. At every two or three steps her strength would fail, and ever a longer time she needed to rest. Suddenly she

broke down altogether, and fell with Kurt into a hole which the snow had deceptively covered. The shock unsettled her. She struck her breast with her hands, and groaned, and then lay still in merciful unconsciousness. Thick and white the large snow-flakes fell over them. Was it their mission to weave a shroud for the lonely, helpless wanderers? Only God could help them now, and his arm was ready.

Again came the dull sound of a wagon rolling over the snow; nearer, and still nearer; slowly, but surely. A musical jingling of bells mingled with the whistling wind. And now a freight wagon drawn by four sturdy horses appeared, moving along the highway. In spite of the bad weather, the driver whistled a lively tune as he drew near. A large, strong, noble-looking dog walked meditatively near him. They reached the break in the road. Will the driver discover the poor waifs in their snow-beds? No! the horses stamped their feet and went on, the wagon rolled past, the driver whistled his song,

and looked neither to the right nor the left. No! no hope in him for the unfortunates. Must they perish where they lie, and the snow be indeed their white shroud? But suddenly the dog stood still, raised his handsome head with its sparkling eyes, and snuffed his nose in the air; then uttered a low, heavy growl like distant thunder. He sprang out into the road, and with a bound reached the spot where the two children lay, and began industriously to scratch away the snow with his paws.

“Sultan! Sultan!” called the driver in a loud voice.

The dog heard, but instead of obeying the call, lifted up his head, and uttered a long howl.

“Sultan!” cried his master anew. “Stupid fellow! I suppose he has found the track of another hare. Here, Sultan, come here!”

Again the dog answered by a mournful bay-ing; then, leaping up, stood before his master, and howled still more loudly.

“Well then, go, Sultan. But you are not

wise," said his master, and would have gone on; but Sultan placed himself in the way, then sprang in front of the horses, as though they might understand, if his master did not; then ran back again to the man, caught his coat between his teeth, dragged violently at it, then ran again to the hole, where he uttered his wild, mournful howl in the most melancholy tones.

"Ah, this is something extraordinary," said the driver, who at last began to comprehend that this was no common freak of Sultan's.

He now laid down the reins, and drew near Sultan, who still stood on the edge of the hole, and had not ceased his howls. One glance showed his master the cause of the unusual conduct of his brave dog. A young girl lay half buried in the snow, with a child in her arms; both pale, with closed eyes; unconscious, perhaps dead.

"Oh, the poor children!" cried the man. "Are they dead? God grant that they still live, and that we may save them, Sultan!"

In an instant he had leaped down into the hole, while Sultan changed his howl into wild, loud barks of sympathy.

The man lifted out the boy first. "Thank the dear Lord, he still lives!" he said, as he carried him quickly to the wagon, where he prepared a clean bed of straw under its shelter. Here he placed the child, and poured down his throat a few drops of wine from a bottle which he took out of one of the boxes. "This wine is not mine," he said to himself, "but the boy's life must be saved, and I will bear the consequences. Kurt opened his eyes almost immediately, and stammered, "Hilda, dear Hilda, where are you?"

"Be very quiet, my dear little fellow," said the man, "and I will bring her to you; she is not far away, and probably—well, we shall see."

He covered the boy warmly, and hastened back to the hole in the snow. Here, in the meanwhile, the faithful Sultan had not been idle; he had jumped down into the hole, and his master found him crouched beside the young

girl, licking her pale face and hands. The warmth of the dog's body had already done good service. Hilda looked up with eyes wide open, if still a little bewildered, and gazed with a faint smile on the beautiful dog as the man appeared, and with a good-natured, honest face, looked rejoiced to see her alive and conscious.

"Well, young lady, how do you feel?" he said. "You have chosen a cold bed; yet it is well for you that the hole is half-filled with snow; for otherwise you must have frozen to death. But it seems that everything has been well ordered; thank the good God! If now you only do not suffer from the exposure to the weather. But what is the matter? Why do you look around so wildly?"

"Kurt! the little boy!" cried Hilda, full of amazement and trouble, as she recovered more fully her consciousness, remembered her charge, and looked around for him in vain. "Where is the child, my little Kurt?"

"Oh, the little boy," said the wagoner quickly,

when he understood her trouble. "He is all right; be satisfied about him; he is lying warm and dry on a bed in my wagon, and very comfortable, too. I do not believe he has a pain or an ache. He only asks for you. You are Hilda, are you not?"

"Yes, that is my name. Oh, thank the dear Lord that we are saved," cried Hilda from the depths of her heart.

"Yes, you may indeed thank God," said the man. "If he had not led us by at the right moment (and even then it was to Sultan that he gave the power and instinct to discover you in the snow), if we had come but a little later, we might have found only your dead bodies lying in the snow. Is the little one your brother? You cannot be his mother—you are too young."

"No, not my brother, but he is just the same to me as if he were," replied Hilda. "Oh, I pray you, take me to him; he will be alarmed about me."

"Yes, I have seen that already," said the man.

"Can you stand, young lady, or shall I help you?"

Hilda attempted to raise herself up by clinging to the large dog, but was still too weak, and with a sigh fell back again.

"I see you are not able; your limbs are numb with cold," said the wagoner, "but that will soon pass off. I will carry you; you will not be much heavier than the little boy; now hold fast to my shoulders." And the next moment the strong man had taken her up in his arms, and carried her as he had borne little Kurt to the wagon. Sultan, still barking joyfully, bounded beside them. It was touching to see the meeting between Hilda and Kurt. The little fellow shouted aloud as he put his arms around Hilda, and she pressed him to her heart, and kissed him, while the tears stood in her eyes.

"Oh, thank God, thank God!" she uttered. "It is indeed true, that when the need is greatest, his help is nearest."

Their rescuer looked at the two children with

great interest. Although rough in appearance and unpolished in his manners, a warm heart beat in his breast, and he heartily rejoiced that he had been the means of saving the waifs, who, though deserted by all others, loved each other so dearly.

“Well, well! hold fast to each other, and be content,” he said after a time, when they had become a little more calm after the first delight of seeing each other. “Here, young lady, swallow a few drops of wine out of this bottle; it will be good for you.”

Hilda stretched out her hand for the bottle, but her former weakness overpowered her again; her arm fell helpless to her side, and her face grew still paler.

“What is it?” asked the man anxiously. “What ails you? Only tell me, and I will gladly help you, if it is in my power.”

“I am so hungry; oh, so hungry!” murmured Hilda, half unconsciously, with quivering lips.

“Oh, is that it? well, we will soon help that.”

And the honest fellow reached quickly for his bag of provisions, which hung in the back part of the wagon near the hay and straw for the horses. He took out some bread, butter, and ham ; cut off with his large pocket-knife several good slices of bread, spread the butter upon them, and offered them with the ham to Hilda and Kurt. Both ate with relish, and the hue of health soon returned to their faces. Soon Hilda was able to express her gratitude to the compassionate wagoner who had acted the part of the good Samaritan towards them.

“ Oh, that is nothing,” he interrupted, “ I have done only my duty as a Christian ; one would be worse than the heathen, if he could pass you two children in the snow, and not take pity on you. Tell me now where you are going, that you are compelled in this severe winter weather to travel on the deserted highway alone ; and how you happened to fall into that hole, from which by such a narrow chance you both came out alive. But take your own time ; do not hasten ; I will

come into the wagon, so that you need not talk loudly, and Sultan shall also jump in to help keep us warm. So! do not move; we all have room enough. Keep yourself well covered, for you are still wet and half-frozen. Now, Sultan! Jump in! And now we will go on. In an hour we will reach the village, where you shall soon have a hot supper and a warm bed!" While he was speaking, he had sprung into the wagon, seated himself near the children, and now took the reins in his hands. Sultan with a bound reached Hilda's side, and lay down between her and Kurt. The horses started, and the wagon was again in motion. With a feeling of gladness and gratitude, Hilda looked at Kurt and the sturdy, jolly wagoner.

"Now," said the latter, as his horses went on at a good pace, "now we can talk, that is if you are not still too weary; in that case we can well wait till we reach the village, and you are rested. It is not exactly curiosity, although I own to some of that too, but I would like to know how

it is that two children, as you are, are left to wander about in the world alone."

Hilda related her story. She told him of her past life with Jonathan, how she had become separated from him, and of her wandering since then through long weeks of hardship and suffering with little Kurt. If she might only reach the town in Silesia where she hoped to obtain news of Kurt's family!

"Well, that is a coincidence," said the wagoner, rubbing his hands with pleasure. "See here, I am just on the way to Striegau: I have no business there, and will probably not remain there over night; I can take you with me, so you will have no more trouble about that."

"Oh, how good you are! how kind!" cried Hilda, her eyes filling with tears of joy.

"Not a bit of it!" answered the wagoner sturdily. "I can see very plainly that you are a brave girl, and the good God will not let you suffer. I will be glad to have you and the boy with me. Your company will help to make the

time pass more quickly, so say no more about it. I will put you down in Striegau; then you must trust boldly in God, who has shown you to-day that he will not forsake you, but will ever lead you onwards towards the hands that he has willed to help you. I know well the little one must be a heavy burden to you, but it is a noble heart that will not leave him. Always look up and do not be discouraged; the sorest need will always bring you some succor from above, and you will surely some day find a reward for your care of the orphan child."

"Oh, I do not wish a reward," said Hilda earnestly. "Any one else in my place would do the same thing. I will be happy if I can find a good home among his father's people, for I know that this moving about from place to place, and the uncertainty of receiving food and shelter, cannot be good for him."

"You are right, young girl," said the man, "but do not lose courage. God will lead you to some haven where you will find rest and peace."

But what are your plans, if you succeed in finding the little fellow's relatives, and they take him home to themselves?"

"Then? Well, then I will go to Gerschowetz, on the Polish border, where my old nurse Dorothy lived. The landlord of the inn advised me particularly to go there."

"To Gerschowetz! Now see how things come about!" cried the man. "I am a native of Gerschowetz, and my old mother is still living there. She will be glad to receive news of me. You must inquire for her if you go there, and she will take you in with pleasure when you tell her you bring greetings and a message from her son, Michael Dombrowsky. Indeed, the dear old woman has not heard from me for a long time, because I cannot write, and my master has no time. But I send her money from time to time as I can spare it, and she knows I do not forget her. See how plainly things show that the good God has ordered it that I should find you in the snow."

Hilda promised very willingly to look for Frau Dombrowsky if she should reach Gerschowetz, for it would be a great advantage to her to know of a place where she could find shelter while pursuing her inquiries. They talked much further of the little town, and the old nurse, and of what that secret might be which she had carried with her to the grave. Michael considered it a matter of much more importance than the innkeeper of the village had thought it, and asked many questions about it.

“It is a very strange story,” he said. “Look you, young lady, poor peasant people cannot generally afford to have nurses for their children; and if this Dorothy of whom you speak really was your nurse, then you must surely come of a good family. A great many wicked things have been done over yonder in Poland. I heard of them in my youth when I lived in Gerschowetz. Who knows whether you were not born there? You have quite a Polish countenance, and a fine, distinguished manner, that we do not often find

among the peasants. Yes, surely you must go to Gerschowetz, and seek my mother; she is an observing woman, and knows more than most folks think. You can open your whole heart to her, and depend on her for advice. Who knows what you may discover there? God leads men often in wonderful ways, and guides them to their fate by the finest thread. To me it is very plain that it is for some good purpose he has let me find you."

They made many conjectures, but still no real clue could they find to the mystery that hovered over Hilda's birth and destiny. But that a secret existed seemed to the honest Michael without a doubt, and he impressed upon Hilda the importance of making all possible inquiry in Gerschowetz, and, above all, of taking his mother into her confidence. At last they reached the village, and their conversation on this subject was at an end for the day. Michael cared for the two children as a father, ordered for them a good warm supper and a comfortable bed-room,

and rested not till he had done all that was possible for them.

The true-hearted, self-sacrificing Hilda had won his interest and regard, as she had those of every one else with whom she met.

The worst of the journey was now over. Michael took them the remainder of the way to Striegau, where they arrived in a few days without danger or fatigue; but here they must be separated from the kind man. It might be a long time before Hilda could learn anything of Kurt's relatives. Michael's business led him to Sudosten, while Hilda, after she should make all the inquiries possible, must travel in the opposite direction to Gerschowetz. So they parted, but not before Michael had satisfied himself that they were comfortably settled for the present. Hilda had still a little money left, and Michael secretly dropped several dollars into Kurt's pocket, where Hilda found it soon after he had started on his journey. It was hard to say good-bye to their only friend, and Hilda's tears flowed. Kurt put

his arms around his new friend's neck, and clung to him as though he would keep him with them. Michael too was affected. "God leads us," he said, "and I have a presentiment, that our heavenly Father will bring all things to a successful end with you, my dear young lady. May he be with you in all your way, and smooth the rough places of the world, that they may not wound your feet as you go over them." He pressed her hand warmly as he spoke, and Hilda returned the cordial grasp; then the whip cracked, the horses started, and the freight-wagon rolled away.

Hilda was again alone with Kurt. It gave her a fresh feeling of pain, but she did not lose courage. God had so surely taken care of her on her hard and weary journey, that she deemed it a sin to doubt his farther grace and mercy. "He is my staff and my refuge," she said to herself over and over again. "As long as he is with me, what shall I fear, though I wander through the whole world?"

CHAPTER IV.

A REFUGE.

MICHAEL had taken Hilda and Kurt to a little inn well-known to him in former times. A cheerful, robust, ever-busy landlady kept the house, and Hilda soon found that Michael had left them in excellent hands. The good Frau Kinsky received her with motherly kindness, for Michael had related to her the story of the two children, and her honest heart knew how to appreciate the faithful love with which the poor forsaken girl had devoted herself to Kurt. She put her in a bright, cosy room, and made her as comfortable as she could, and gave her friendly advice, as far as she was able, in the search for Kurt's relatives. But, also, Hilda soon discovered that no one in the town could give her any clue to the information she sought. Many remembered that a poor actress had died in the place, but no one had

known her husband. Every inquiry remained fruitless, and Hilda began to grow discouraged: not for her own sake, for it would have caused her deep pain and sorrow to part with the child, whom she had grown to love so dearly in spite of the hardships through which they had passed. But she had hoped for a comfortable home, and the means of a good education, which she feared she would never be able to provide for him. Still she did not give up all hope for the future. "God will help us!" she said to the landlady, as she related to her the failure of her efforts to learn anything of Kurt's father.

"You may be helped sooner than you expect," said the Frau, cheerfully. "Listen to me, child; you have now been eight days with me, and during this time I have observed you pretty closely. We could agree very well together, I believe; and my house is often so full of guests, that many a time I would be glad of an extra pair of hands to help serve the people more quickly. Do you not see that you could stay

with me, and be always on hand to assist me? I like your ways; you are quick and neat, orderly and clean. Stay, then; you will have a comfortable home with me, and that will be much better than wandering through the country. I mean well by you. Do not take too long to decide, but let us settle it at once."

"And little Kurt?"

"Oh, well, we can try and get some family to take him, or put him in an orphan asylum," answered the woman. "What is the child to you but a burden? You have done your duty by him, and must now think of yourself. You do not expect to be dragged down all your life with the boy, do you? You have now seen that you can learn nothing of his father's family. So put an end to it all by sending the youngster away, and stay here with me."

Hilda shook her head. "I cannot do it. My whole heart would rise up against it. I know you mean kindly, Frau Kinsky, and I am grateful to you for it, but my conscience would not allow me

to part with Kurt. I promised his dead aunt that I would not forsake him, and I will honestly keep my word."

"Oh, well, then there is nothing more to be said," said the woman in displeasure. "I will not have the child around here. But perhaps you will think better of it. Consider my proposal over night, and give me your answer to-morrow."

With these words, Frau Kinsky went away to attend to her guests. Hilda went to her room, and clasped little Kurt, who sprang smiling to meet her, tenderly in her arms.

"No, a thousand times no!" she exclaimed, "I will not be so wicked and selfish as to think only of my own welfare, and forget the poor child. Never will I leave him, unless in the protection of loving relatives, where he can be better cared for than by me, the poor wanderer."

This temptation passed lightly over her noble, high-principled nature. Certainly, she dreaded starting out in the cold winter weather again on a long journey; but it would have been harder still

to break faith with her own conscience. The boy she held as a gift entrusted to her care by God, and she must guard and protect him, no matter how she might suffer in consequence. This feeling stood unshaken in her heart, and swallowed up every thought of self.

The next morning she again packed her little bundle, and went to take leave of the landlady. Frau Kinsky shook her head in displeasure.

"I see how it is," she said. "You are a self-willed creature, who cannot listen to reason, and only tread your fortune under your feet. Well, then, so be it. I wash my hands of you. I have offered to do all I could for you, and you refuse to accept it."

"Yes, you have been very kind, Frau Kinsky, and I will always remember your goodness with gratitude," said Hilda, meekly. "But even for my own happiness' sake, I cannot give up Kurt. I would never have another peaceful hour if I did. Again, hearty thanks for your kindness. May God reward you for it; and now farewell."

"Child, think again! There is still time," said the woman once more.

But Hilda shook her head. "It cannot be," she said, and turned away. A few minutes later she was again on the highway, and Kurt bounded beside her, chattering in a lively manner. A long, tiresome journey it was over the snow-covered land, and many times severely cold. The poor children made but slow progress, for Kurt could naturally walk no great distance in a day, and Hilda was herself not strong enough to travel constantly. As long as she still had some money, they went on with some degree of comfort. She could at least pay for their night's lodging, and they need not suffer hunger. But although she now and then met with compassionate people, who took them in over night, and fed them, without accepting payment, the little stock of money gradually melted away, and before she had traveled half the distance to Gerschowetz her pocket was empty. Not even a half-penny left! For the remainder

of the way there was nothing but to ask charity of the people, and beg at the doors of the rich.

That was very hard for her; but necessity compelled her, and for Kurt's sake, she conquered her aversion. Seldom was her quiet petition refused or harshly answered. Most people gave her a trifle, and at night she generally found some place of shelter, if it was only in the straw or hay of a barn.

However, neither she nor Kurt could long stand this way of living. The child broke down at last, and grew sick and feverish, and Hilda saw the impossibility of still continuing their journey to Gerschowetz, where she had hoped to find a refuge with the mother of honest Michael Dombrowsky. Fortunately they were not far from a town when Kurt was taken sick, and Hilda carried him thither in her arms. After much fatigue and distress she reached its gates, and walked unsteadily along the street.

But what could she do now? Where find any one to take her in—the penniless beggar with

a sick child? She thought she would look for a hospital or some charitable institution; but, on making inquiries of the passers-by, learned that there were no places of that kind in the town.

A noble, womanly heart can endure and suffer much, and such a heart surely beat in Hilda's breast; but now, as faint, hungry, and exhausted, she stood on the snow-covered pavement, without money, friends, or shelter, the weeping child in her arms complaining pitifully of cold and pain, her strength and courage threatened to fail altogether.

"Have pity on us, gracious Father," she murmured in dismay, and looked up almost hopelessly to heaven. But the glance upward, to the well-spring of all compassion, revived her spirit once more.

"I must not doubt," she said to herself. "God leadeth. He will guide my steps to some good people. 'Knock,' says the Saviour, 'and it shall be opened:' but knock also with faith and confidence."

She tried at two or three houses, knocking timidly, and entreating a little help for the sick child. They gave truly but little; still she received enough to be able to pay for a shelter for the night. She looked around, and perceived at a street corner a notice of a musical entertainment. The sight gave her courage.

"Singers are here!" she said hopefully to herself. "Perhaps they will employ me. If they would only give me a situation for a few weeks till Kurt has recovered, and the hardest of the winter is over! Jonathan always said that I had talent. I will go to the manager and see." With reviving spirits she inquired the way to the manager's residence, and found to her agreeable surprise, that she was close beside it.

"God leadeth," she said bravely to herself, as she mounted the steps and rang the bell. She was directed to a room where the manager and some gentleman were in earnest conversation. Timidly she remained standing in the doorway, without being observed by any one; therefore

she could not help hearing what was spoken in the room.

"It is a very unfortunate business," the manager said angrily. "Nearly all the tickets are sold, and we have an unusually good programme that we should faithfully carry out. And now, just two hours before the time of commencement, must you come and tell me that the best singer fails me? It is really too bad!"

One of the gentlemen, apparently the leader, shrugged his shoulders. "I have just seen her," he answered. "The poor thing is quite hoarse, and cannot speak aloud, much less sing. It is absolutely impossible. The piece must be given up, and something else substituted for it."

"It is out of the question. We cannot get up another programme so quickly," said the manager in displeasure. "And even if it were possible, the people will be disappointed; they wish to hear 'Preciosa,' and, failing that, will demand their money back, and we will have no one in the hall. It is the worst thing that could

happen. Any one else could be replaced, but no one else can sing Preciosa. Can you find me a substitute, leader? Are you able to do that?"

The leader only shrugged his shoulders again, in sign of his complete helplessness. Hilda stood in the doorway, and listened attentively.

Preciosa was the name of the piece to be sung, and which must be left out, because the singer who took the principal part had suddenly become hoarse. This she took in breathlessly, as though it was said to her especially. How often had she herself sung the part of Preciosa!—with but poor surroundings it is true, but for all that she was perfect in the words and music, and she could hardly restrain herself from walking up to the Director, and telling him that she was able and willing to act as a substitute for the hoarse singer. Yet she lingered, then took a few steps forward, and was perceived by the manager, who, full of wrath and disappointment, walked up and down the room.

"What do you wish? What are you doing here? Who sent you?" he burst forth. "Can a man not be free from beggars even in his own library? Speak, then; tell me what you want."

"Pardon, Herr," said Hilda gently, "a servant directed me here. I have heard a part of your conversation, and learned from it that you wish a substitute for the part of Preciosa."

"Well, what then? How does that affect you?"

"I can sing the part well, if you will allow me," said Hilda.

The manager stared. "Is the girl crazy?" he cried out.

"No, Herr, I am not crazy, but I have often sung Preciosa," replied Hilda quietly, but with confidence.

"You! Impossible!" returned the manager again.

Certainly the appearance of Hilda gave little credit to her statement. Her dress was miserably poor and patched, and her face half hidden by a

thick woolen hood; besides, she still carried Kurt in her arms.

"Oh, Herr," she said again, "I would not surely tell you a falsehood that must be discovered at once. Try me; indeed, I have very often sung the part of Preciosa."

"This is truly something wonderful," said the manager, already softening his tones, and he drew nearer to Hilda.

"Listen, child; if this is true, and you will sing Preciosa for me to-night, you will find me not ungrateful for such unexpected good fortune. But it is not possible! Not possible!"

"Give her a trial," said the leader, now joining in the conversation. "Here is the piano. Let us have the beautiful song of Preciosa when she first appears—without notes, of course."

"Certainly!" returned Hilda, "I can sing it for you either with an accompaniment or without one."

"Well then, come hither," and the leader placed himself at the piano.

"A moment's patience, please," said Hilda. "This child is sick; I cannot sing well with him in my arms. Will you show me where to lay him down?"

"Oh, put him here on the sofa," said the wife of the manager, who was in the room, and had been observing the strange scene with interest. "Yes, place the poor little one here. Is it really true that you are a singer? If you have not promised more than you can fulfill, I will surely take care of him. But now be quick—there is no time to lose."

Hilda put Kurt down gently in a corner of the broad sofa, threw off her coarse wrappings, and moved with confidence toward the piano. All were surprised at her changed appearance. None had imagined the shabby coverings could hide such a lovely, bright face, and graceful figure.

"Now, if you please," said Hilda, and began after a short prelude the song, with a voice clear as silver bells. All held their breath to listen, and the manager rubbed his hands in a transport of delight.

"Bravo! bravo!" he cried out, as the last notes softly died away. "I call that singing! What is your name, my dear child?"

Hilda told him her name.

"Well then, my dear Hilda," he continued, "your voice is fine; I have never heard the song better rendered. But are you familiar with the words of the whole part? Do you know them perfectly?" Hilda nodded with a smile. "I know it," she replied, "from beginning to end."

"And you have confidence enough to try it without having had a rehearsal?"

"I can do it easily," said she, "because I have so often taken the part of Preciosa."

"Well, then, if that is true, you are surely a great blessing to me," said the manager. "Hasten, leader; let us take her over to the hall, and provide her with a suitable dress. This is indeed a fortunate accident. Let us hasten."

"Do not be too fast, Herr Manager," returned the cooler leader, thoughtfully. "The young girl has sung this song beautifully; but is it safe

to judge from that, that she is perfect in the whole piece? Let us hear some more of it, young lady; any part you wish—it is all the same.”

Hilda did not hesitate; with her usual courage and self-possession she sang from several different parts of the piece, and the leader, too, was satisfied.

“Good!” he said. “It will certainly do. You seem to have a fortunate talent, Fraulein Hilda; now quickly to work. Have the goodness to accompany us.”

“But little Kurt?” said Hilda, who never forgot the child.

“Leave him in my hands,” said the manager’s wife. “You have come to our relief in a great difficulty, and can count on my gratitude, and careful nursing of the child. I will take him to my own room, and at once send for a physician.”

Hilda was content. The wife of the manager seemed a kind, motherly woman. She kissed Kurt, bade him gently to be quite good while she was away, and promised to return as soon as

possible. Then she was ready to accompany the two gentlemen to the Concert Hall. The principal parts were hastily rehearsed, and Hilda proved again that she had not promised too much. All went on smoothly, and leader and manager beamed with delight, and were as polite and respectful to Hilda as to a queen.

A suitable dress was found and made ready for her, and when she appeared before the large audience, she looked so lovely that she was received with much applause. This applause did not lessen during the concert. Her beautiful voice entranced her listeners, and she was called back again and again amid a storm of clapping hands.

"You must stay with me," said the manager to her as she returned to his house. "I cannot let you go away, and will gladly pay you a salary that only my best singers receive."

The manager's wife and the leader, too, begged her to remain; and, although she still shrank from appearing before the public, and could

never forget the misery of the old days when Jonathan compelled her to go on the stage, she looked at Kurt, who lay calmly sleeping on a comfortable bed, and determined, for the present at least, to yield to the manager's wishes. She would not bind herself, but agreed to stay only on the condition that she might leave when she wished. This arrangement was made, but with great unwillingness and many objections from the manager and leader, and Hilda found herself and Kurt for the present provided for.

CHAPTER V.

A GRANDFATHER.

HILDA remained in the town till the winter was over, and won by her gentle, modest manners, as well as by her wonderful talent, the favor of the public and the manager, and the love and respect of all the singers. The bright, sunny-faced maiden fascinated every one, and the directors could always count on a crowded house when it was known that she would sing. She added much to the profits of the manager, who would do almost anything for her, and would gladly have kept her with him always.

But when the lovely spring days came, when the snow melted, and the warm sun drew the fresh young green buds out of shrubs and trees, Hilda began to think seriously of her interrupted journey to Gerschowetz, and became anxious to set out again, that she might discover, if possible,

something of her own birth and family. She had been very careful to save enough money for the journey out of her winter's earnings, so that she need not now fear the distress of the past journey. She told the manager of her desire, and he admitted with regret that it must be as she wished, but begged her to stay just a few weeks longer.

"You must know, dear Hilda, that I am expecting a visit from a celebrated artist, who lives at the Residence. I would like to have some of our best entertainments while he is here, and if you leave me now, I shall lose the greatest attraction of my concerts, for I can find no one who can well take your place. So stay but a few weeks longer, and you will lose nothing by it."

The manager had been so good to Hilda that she could not refuse this request. She stayed, and the next day the expected guest arrived. A series of entertainments was given, and Hilda's talent, grace and beauty still drew a large audience night after night.

But it was ordered that she too might reap some benefit from her self-denial in yielding to the wishes of the manager. Unexpectedly thereby came to her the information that she had so earnestly sought, and at last had given up as a fruitless task. This was the news of Kurt's father.

She took the boy with her one day to the Hall to the rehearsal, and the pretty child excited immediately the attention and interest of the stranger artist. He inquired about him, and Hilda told him in a few words the story of the child. The stranger listened with lively emotion.

"This is wonderful," he said. "For more than a year I have sought for this child, and have even put advertisements relating to him in all the newspapers, and by a fortunate accident he comes into my path. I knew the father of the poor child well, Fraulein Hilda, for he was my best friend; and when he died, he confided to my care a little packet of papers, and begged me to place them in the hands of his wife, whom

he had been obliged to leave. The poor Müller led a miserable life, and the grief of not being able to provide for his wife and child as he wished gnawed perpetually at his heart, and without doubt hastened his death. Do you know the story of his life, Fraulein Hilda?"

"No," she answered, "I know nothing but what I have already told you about the child's mother."

"Well, I will tell you in a few words," said the artist. "Müller was the son of a noble family. Some irresistible inclination led him to the stage. His father, a proud, high-spirited, stern man, disinherited him for this step, and wrote to his son, forbidding him ever to come into his sight again. Müller hoped perhaps that time would soften the anger of his father, but in this he deceived himself. To add to his misfortune, he now married, and, of course, without his father's consent, the poor but beautiful Leonora, and by this act barred completely every pathway to reconciliation. Once he ventured to seek his father, and

entreat his pardon; for, to tell the truth, he had in the meanwhile learned the misery of a traveling actor's life, and longed to free himself from it. But the attempt failed. Perhaps if the repentant son had come alone, and thrown himself at his father's feet, pardon might have been granted. But unfortunately, he brought a wife of peasant birth, and would not be separated from her. A true heart beat in his breast, although he had so recklessly forfeited home and family when he went on the stage. His father a second time rejected the son, and there now remained nothing for him but to join again the actor's troupe, to keep his wife from want. The trouble and grief broke both their hearts. His wife was first taken sick, and he was obliged to leave her and travel with the company. Soon after, a hemorrhage ended his life. I went to him, and he died in my arms. I was prevented for some time from carrying his message to his wife, and when at last I was able to reach the town in which he had left her, I found that she

too was deceased. Only a grave was there. I inquired for the child, the little Kurt, but no one could tell me what had become of him—for who troubles himself as to the fate of a poor actor's child? So I left the place with a sad heart, but have carefully preserved the papers entrusted to me by poor Müller. I have them at home, and will send them to you, Fraulein Hilda, when I return to the Residence. You must make what use of them you think best for the boy. His parentage can be satisfactorily proved, for among the papers are the marriage-certificate of his father and mother, and the register of the child's birth and baptism. Perhaps if the grandfather could see the poor forsaken child, his hard heart might soften, and he would give to the little one the love that he refused to his only son. Yet I would not presume to dictate to you, Fraulein Hilda. Act according to your own discretion and judgment. You have had already, I fear, a heavy burden to bear in the child."

"Oh, that is nothing," said Hilda, much

pleased with the information she had received. "I will take the papers, and go with Kurt to his grandfather, and beg and entreat him to take the child of his son into his fatherly care."

"You have not far to go, Fraulein," said the artist. "The grandfather lives here in Silesia; he is a wealthy land owner; his name is the Baron Semberg. But you will have a hard task, I fear; for he hates every one who has had any connection with the stage, and would not even go to hear a concert. You will not be received very kindly by him."

"I will not care for that," replied Hilda, earnestly. "He may treat me with contempt, and even turn me out of his house; that will be nothing, if he will only give love and kindness to little Kurt. I want nothing for myself; I ask nothing of him but to listen to me, and to look at his grandchild. I will soften his heart with my prayers, even if I must kneel at his feet."

"Well, I wish you good luck," said the artist. "But if he will not listen to you, what then?"

"Oh, no man could be so hard as to turn away such a lovely child, and his own grandson, too! But if such a thing should happen, I will keep him with me forever."

"You have a brave, true heart; and may the good God grant you success! I can almost believe that the stern man will not be able to resist your prayers. At any rate, I will send you the papers as soon as possible."

The artist kept his word. The day following his departure the packet arrived with the various documents, and now Hilda lost no time in seeking Kurt's grandfather. Gerschowetz could wait: of herself the faithful girl always thought last.

When she found herself in possession of all the necessary papers, Hilda did not find it hard to obtain information of the estate of the old Baron Semberg, and hopefully started with Kurt on her way thither.

This time the journey was quickly made, for now Hilda had money, and could hire a comfortable carriage to take them. After traveling

two days, they reached the Baron's castle, which stood on a hill, with a pretty village spread out at its feet. Hilda went first into the village to learn what she could of the Baron's life and disposition, and soon drew from a talkative landlady all she wished to know; but the account was not favorable, and her hopes began to sink. The old Baron still lived, but in the greatest seclusion, and saw no one but those of his own household. Lonely and misanthropic, he dwelt in the gloomy old castle, surrounded by a few faithful servants, who were as unapproachable as their master.

"Has the Baron been informed," asked Hilda, "that his only son, whom he turned from his door, has died in poverty and distress?"

"Surely he knows it," said the landlady, "but they say that even his death could not soften the heart of the old man towards him. There is a report that a letter came to him from the young Baron, written on his dying bed, in which he entreated grace and compassion for his wife and

child, but the relentless man tore it up and threw the pieces in the fire. I do not know though whether that is true or not. But we are all very certain that he never has troubled himself about the wife or child. He is a rigid old man."

"And still I must go to him, and take Kurt," said Hilda reluctantly to herself. "Yes, he shall learn that his innocent grandchild lives, and perhaps God will melt his heart at the sight of the child who has harmed no one, and yet is left poor, desolate and alone in the world."

The next morning Hilda dressed Kurt very neatly, and took him by the hand, starting out boldly for the castle. It was a dark, heavy-looking building, descended from the middle ages, with massive round towers and thick walls. The large iron gates were closed, but at Hilda's ring an old servant appeared, and inquired her business.

"I wish to speak to the Baron," said Hilda.

"The Herr Baron sees no one except upon

very urgent business," replied the grave-looking servant.

"My business is of the greatest importance," said Hilda boldly. "I have brought the Baron some valuable papers."

The servant measured her with doubtful, suspicious glances. "You! a young girl! And valuable papers!" he said, more to himself than to Hilda. "And what do you with the child there? Why must he come with you?"

"I will answer all necessary questions to the Baron himself," replied Hilda. "Please give him my message, good friend. I come not begging, but bring news over which the gracious Baron will surely rejoice—if he has a spark of feeling," she added in her heart.

The old man still stood irresolute. "Certainly, you do not look like a beggar," he murmured to himself, "but woe betide me if I let you in! Give me the papers, mademoiselle; I will take them to the master; he then can decide whether I let you in or not."

"The papers shall not leave my hands until I place them in those of the Baron himself," said Hilda firmly. "They are too important. The happiness and fortune of perhaps a whole life hangs upon them. Say this to your master, and he will surely give you orders to admit me."

The old man shook his head. "I will venture it, because you insist upon standing here," he said after much thought, and departed with slow steps.

After a long time, which seemed an eternity to the waiting Hilda, he returned, carrying a bunch of keys in his hand. Hilda breathed more freely. She knew now she would be admitted to the castle, and new hope sprang up within her heart. Once face to face with the Baron, she fully believed he could not resist the sight of his fair young grandchild, and would surely take him to his heart and home.

"The master has commanded me to let you in," said the old man, as he turned the key slowly in the rusty lock. "I am surprised at it,

but he is in a milder mood than usual to-day. But before I lead you to him, you must give me your name, and wait here until I tell him."

Hilda gave him her name, but prudently reserved the fact that she had sung in public concerts; and the servant went away again, leaving her standing just within the castle gates.

As she looked up, she saw a man with iron-gray hair and beard and piercing black eyes, that observed her from one of the windows in the building above her. He vanished almost immediately, and soon the old servant appeared in the doorway, and beckoned her to enter.

"Follow me!" he said shortly, and ascended a wide, winding staircase, with sandstone steps, in which long years of usage had worn deep hollows. Hilda followed with a beating heart, for the momentary glimpse of the old man at the window had not tended to raise her courage. He had looked to her stern and forbidding. If that was the Baron, she had certainly taken a hard task upon herself.

When the old servant had reached the top of the staircase, he turned into a long corridor, and, opening a door, bade Hilda enter.

"The Herr Baron will be with you immediately," he said.

Hilda entered a spacious apartment; the door closed behind her, and she stood alone with little Kurt, who could not comprehend what she sought in this gloomy old castle.

"It is not very pleasant here, dear Hilda," said the child, clinging closely to her. "Let us go away."

"Patience, Kurt; patience, my dear little boy," she answered. "Our coming to this castle is more important than you think; and see how beautiful is everything around you! Look at those lovely pictures in fine gilt frames, and the great mirrors on the walls, and the shining armor and weapons hanging on the pillars!"

"I do not care for these, Hilda; I am afraid. The pictures are all dark and fearful-looking; I feel as though they would harm me if you were

not with me. Come, let us go away," said the child anxiously.

"Oh Kurt, how foolish!" said Hilda, smiling. "Pictures are not alive, and can harm no one. Only keep quiet and behave prettily, dear boy; soon we shall know what Providence has in store for you. But, of course, you cannot understand it yet. Whatever happens must be for the best, Kurt. We will keep up our courage."

Kurt was silent, but shrank still more closely to Hilda's side, and almost covered himself with the folds of her dress. As Hilda softly stroked his hair, and tried to reassure him, a side door opened, and the tall though somewhat bent figure of an old man entered. He looked inquiringly from under his white bushy brows at the young girl who bowed before him. Hilda recognized the stern countenance that she had seen watching her from the window as she stood in the courtyard.

"What do you wish of me?" asked the old Baron shortly.

Hilda was for a moment doubtful how to begin. Then she obeyed the first impulse of her heart; fell on her knees before the hard-looking man, stretched up her clasped hands entreatingly, and cried in imploring tones: "Pity, Herr Baron! Compassion for a poor, deserted, unfortunate child!"

A sudden flush colored the brow of the old man, and he frowned darkly at these words.

"What do you mean?" he asked harshly. "Who are you? Who is that boy? Answer me!"

"This boy is Kurt Von Semberg, the son of your only child, your little grandson. Oh, have you no love for him? Look at these papers, Herr; they show without a doubt that the boy is truly your grandchild. Will you not be a father to the poor orphan?"

There was no reply; rigid, upright, with flashing eyes and clenched hands, the old Baron stood above Hilda. Suddenly he uttered a gasping sound, and turned and left the room, closing

the door heavily behind him. Hilda looked after him in astonishment, and knew not what to think—whether to hope or fear.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TEMPTATION.

HILDA arose slowly from her knees, and put her arms tenderly around Kurt.

“Poor child!” she sighed, “I fear that all is lost. Your grandfather will not listen to me, and he has not given you one glance. It is a disappointment; but you will never be quite forsaken, as long as I, with God’s help, am able to care for you. Your only relative disowns you; then must I even be father, mother, brother and sister to you.”

“Grandfather?” said Kurt. “That cross old man my grandfather, and you wish to leave me with him? No, no! I do not like it here. Let us go, dear Hilda! Quickly, before that wicked-looking man comes back.”

With a troubled face he pulled at Hilda’s dress; but she still lingered, for down in her

heart there still lurked a hope of a more favorable result from the interview.

But the minutes passed away; a quarter, a half hour she waited, hoping for the return of the Baron—no one came. At last a door creaked on its hinges, and through it she perceived the grim old servant who had admitted her to the castle.

"Well, I hope you are satisfied," he said harshly. "The Baron has nearly had a stroke in consequence of your shameless news, and now I have orders to bid you leave the castle, and never let him see your face again."

"And the child? Will his grandfather do nothing for him?" asked Hilda.

"He will know nothing of him," said the servant. "And farther, he insists that he shall leave the place without delay, and never be taught to consider the Herr Baron as a relative, or as one upon whom he has the slightest claim. There is nothing more for you to do here, *mademoiselle*."

Hilda drooped her head sadly. "Oh, the hard-hearted man!" she said. "Come, Kurt. And you may inform your master that I, a poor girl, will endeavor to fulfill his duty to the cast-off child. Tell him that surely one day he must render up an account, and his own son will then be his accuser. And now let us leave this inhospitable house, before whose sill I would shake the dust from my feet. The unnatural man never shall see his grandchild again. We will leave him to his conscience, that cannot let him rest in peace after this day."

"I am glad," cried Kurt. "Let us hasten, dear Hilda; for if you were not here, I could not stay a minute in this place. It is so dark and gloomy, it frightens me."

He pulled her by the hand, and Hilda delayed no longer. She saw plainly that here there was no hope for the child. In five minutes they stood outside the castle gates, which the old servant quickly banged to, and locked behind them. Bolt and bar grated on their ears, and

the old building lay silent and shadowy, as though it held no living thing within its walls. One last glance Hilda cast on the blackened towers; then, pressing the boy's hand, she hastened back to the village. Within an hour she again entered the carriage she had hired, and at evening the inhospitable house lay far behind her.

What next?

Hilda thought that now the best thing for her to do was to proceed without further delay to Gerschowetz, and seek out the mother of honest Michael Dombrowsky. Her stock of money was more than sufficient to carry them there, and once arrived, she would make every effort to discover some trace of her own birth and family. So, as she approached a road leading in the direction of Gerschowetz, she sent the carriage back, and continued the journey by post. This was a cheaper mode of conveyance, and she wished to use her money sparingly, that she might not present herself as a beggar, asking the charity of Mother Dombrowsky.

Several other travelers were packed in the old rumbling post-coach. Two of them seemed to be country people, who announced in the course of the conversation that they were going to Posen on business; the third, a talkative fellow, called himself a traveling merchant, and the fourth and last wrapped himself closely in his cloak, and pulled his fur cap over his eyes, so that one could not plainly see his face. Hilda observed him but little, as the traveling merchant with the coolest impudence claimed her whole attention. He asked her one question after another as to who she was, whither bound, and the reason of her journey, and his curiosity seemed not to have the slightest limits. Hilda answered several questions as reservedly as possible, but the importunate man still went on, till at last, tired of his incessant questions, she leaned back in a corner of the coach and closed her eyes, as though she wished to sleep.

At that time journeys were not made so quickly as in the present day; there were no

railroads in Poland, and the three strong horses drew the coach but slowly over the rough, uneven highway. Hilda did not find it disagreeable compared with her last journey, when she was obliged to travel on foot through the world in all weathers—in sunshine, rain, snow, or freezing cold; but Kurt often grew impatient and restless, until at last, as it began to grow dark, he leaned his head against Hilda's shoulder and fell asleep. In a little while Hilda too began to doze, then slumbered soundly, dreaming perhaps of her sad past life, or maybe of a brighter, happier future, as the heavy coach rolled slowly onward. The night had passed when she again opened her eyes; it was day-break, and she was not a little astonished to find herself and Kurt alone in the coach with the stranger in the fur cap.

“The other travelers left about midnight,” said the stranger, as he perceived her surprise. “You must have slept very soundly, not to have heard them.”

"Yes, very soundly," said Hilda, and looked out of the window, to avoid further conversation. Soon little Kurt awakened, and she busied herself with him, forgetting entirely the presence of their fellow-traveler. But in spite of this, the stranger observed them attentively, especially the boy, on whom his eyes rested continually.

"A pretty child," he began again, "but still a heavy burden for you, as I learned from your conversation with the traveling merchant yesterday. You should try to find a home for him somewhere. Many people would be glad to have him for his beauty."

"I will not part with him," said Hilda, shortly, and drew Kurt closer to her side.

The stranger muttered to himself a few words that she could not understand, and leaned back again in his corner, for he saw that Hilda did not wish to keep up the conversation.

An hour later, the coach reached a station where the horses were changed, and the passengers might breakfast if they wished. Hilda and

Kurt descended from the coach, and bought some milk and bread, which they ate, talking cheerfully to each other, till the sound of the horn announced that it was time to start again. Then Hilda looked for the bag in which she had placed her money, but could not find it. "It must be lying in the coach," she thought, and hastened to look there for it. But it was not in the coach, and its disappearance filled her with the greatest anxiety.

"Some one must have taken it?" she cried.
"Where is my purse?"

The stranger, who stood near, seeing that something was wrong, asked the cause of her trouble, and accompanied her to the waiting-room to make another search for the missing bag. The landlord and servants of the house came and assisted in the search, but the bag was not found.

"And I have not a penny besides what was in it. Nothing with which to pay for my breakfast," cried Hilda through her tears. "Misfortune seems to follow me even here."

The landlady looked at her suspiciously. "Who knows, mademoiselle, whether you really had a bag with money in it? But I have nothing to do with that; pay for your breakfast and go; the coach will not wait forever."

Poor Hilda wrung her hands and wept. Only the stranger cast a kindly glance upon her.

"I saw with my own eyes," he said, "that this young lady yesterday paid for herself and for the child, and put her purse in the bag which she brought into the coach with her. Since then it must have been stolen; there were three other passengers in the coach, who left it at the last station. The theft must have been committed by one of them, or by myself. I beg that my satchel be searched, that I may be cleared of suspicion. As for the others, I fear they must escape with their ill-gotten prize."

"All this is nothing to me," said the woman insolently. "The breakfast must be paid for, and until it is, neither you nor the child shall go one step farther on your journey."

"Very well, then, I will pay the trifling sum," said the stranger, taking out his purse; but Hilda held him back.

"No, I thank you," she said with dignity. "Take this ring," she said to the landlady; "it is of gold, and worth at least twenty times your demand."

The woman would have taken the ring without further parley and put it in her pocket, but the stranger again interfered. "Not so fast, my friend," he said; "either you must pay the young lady the value of the ring over your debt, or I will buy it from her myself, and she then can pay you what belongs to you, and no more."

The woman was obliged to agree to this just arrangement; the stranger paid the value of the ring, and Hilda received several dollars after her claim was settled with the greedy landlady. Then came the question; what had she best do next?

"It will be useless for you to go back, and

attempt to find the thief," said the stranger. "Those rascals will not wait for you, but are doubtless already over the mountains. You would only lose time and money by trying to follow them. You had better go on as far as you have paid your way in the coach, and perhaps something may turn up to your advantage before you reach the end of the journey."

Hilda saw that the stranger was right, and that there was nothing for her to do but follow his advice. So she again entered the coach, and went on with a heavy heart. She had paid for the greater part of the journey, but that would leave her still ten or twelve miles to cross on foot before she could reach the little town of Gerschowetz. But this was the least part of her trouble. Her heart sank when she thought that she must come to Frau Dombrowsky with empty hands, and ask for her hospitality without a penny in her pocket. This weighed on her mind, and brought the tears to her eyes. The stranger let her quietly weep, but when her tears ceased to fall, he spoke to her again.

"Well, young lady," he said, "it is very hard that you should suffer this loss, and I perceive that it grieves you; still, all may yet turn out well. How much money have you lost?"

"There were over eighty dollars in the bag."

"Yes, yes; that is a great deal of money, especially if it is all that you possess," said the stranger. "Now listen to me; the little one there is fortunately asleep, and I can speak openly to you. Know then, that I am a rope-dancer, and belong to a company now in Posen. I have just made a journey in search of a pretty child to exhibit in some of my feats. In vain have I tried in various places to find one to suit my purpose, and am now returning after a fruitless search. Accident placed you yesterday in my path. I listened to your conversation with the traveling merchant, who is probably nothing more than an adventurer, and I understand that you have taken this child only out of compassion; so I propose to buy him of you. I need just such a handsome face and figure as his, and

will pay you well for him. You cannot but admit that he is a burden to you, and you may be glad to be spared the trouble of further caring for him; besides the relief of his maintenance, you will receive a considerable sum of money. Therefore, let us consider it an agreement, as you will not make a better one."

"Never, sir; never!" answered Hilda indignantly. "Am I a trader in human souls, that you dare to make me such a proposition? Because we are friendless, have we no feeling? No, sir; I will not let the boy go from me."

"Do not decide too hastily," urged the man. "Only think that such a chance as this may never come to you again. It will also be best for the poor child. If he grows skillful in the profession, of which there is little doubt, he will some day earn much money; and I will take good care of him, and let him want for nothing to make him comfortable and contented, for it will be to my own advantage that he always appears at his best. I could do nothing with a

sickly, disagreeable child. I want one with a bright, healthy, pretty and cheerful face, such as this boy has. You had better make the agreement; it is best for both you and him."

"No more!" Hilda interrupted decidedly. "He shall not leave me; we will share together what God has ordained for us."

"But hear first, my dear young lady, what I will give you for the boy," continued the man. "Eighty dollars have been stolen from you. I offer you double that sum—triple, then! You will not? Well, then, what do you say to five hundred dollars? That is a capital with which you can lay the foundation of a fortune."

"I could never become happy with the weight of such a wicked action on my conscience," said Hilda unmoved. "Not for ten times that; not for a thousand-fold would I sell little Kurt. Sell him! What kind of a heart do you think I have? To give up the poor child to a training of torture and pain, that he may learn things that have often made me shudder! Oh, no!

Would any mother sell you her child? Certainly not! And I love this child as a mother. Let us drop the subject, I pray you. Kurt and I will never be separated, unless his own relatives have power to take him from me."

Hilda remained firm in her resolution, although the rope-dancer tried hard to change her decision, holding his offer before her eyes, and painting the life of his company as the most delightful in the world. She was heartily glad when they at last reached the point where she must leave the coach, for she would much rather travel on foot alone with Kurt, than listen to the conversation of the rope-dancer, who seemed to think that her refusal of his offer was only a pretext to raise the price he would give for the boy.

With a lighter heart than she had expected, she began again her journey over the highway. The air was mild, the skies blue, the meadows green, and the sun shone brightly over the earth.

"God leadeth," she murmured. "He will guide us into a safe haven at last."

CHAPTER VII.

AN OLD PRAYER-BOOK.

HILDA wandered on and on; as though she could find no rest in the world. Kurt kept bravely up with her, for the weather was fine, and the few dollars she had received for her ring enabled her to procure the necessary shelter and refreshment. On the fifth day of the journey, she beheld at last, in the distance, the towers of Gerschowitz, and pointed them out to her little companion.

"Look, Kurt," she said, "yonder where that green roof shines in the sun, we will at length, I hope, find a resting-place. If Frau Dombrowsky is as good as her son Michael, she will certainly receive us kindly. Keep up your spirits, dear child. In one hour more, we will reach the town."

"Oh, I am quite strong, and not at all tired," replied the boy. "Let us walk faster. Go as quickly as you please; I can keep up with you."

The sun still shone high in the heavens as they walked through the ancient gate of the little town, into its narrow streets.

Hilda inquired for the residence of Frau Dombrowsky, and was after several useless questions cheerfully directed aright. She passed along the streets, and soon beheld the little house in which she had lived with her old nurse Dorothy: she paused before it—it looked so familiar and home-like. There was the same old-fashioned doorway, with its dark, beautifully carved woodwork; there the little window with the blossoming gillyflower before it; and she could not be mistaken. This was the house to which she had been directed as the residence of Frau Dombrowsky. She had surely been sent here. She recalled the merry games which she had played on the square in front of the house, and how when she had grown too wild, the old Dorothy would utter a word of caution from the little open window.

“It is very strange,” she said to herself. “I

have been led back to the same little house where I lived with Dorothy, and which I left with so sad a heart."

She thought this a good omen, and walked bravely through the gate and up to the open door. All was just the same as it lived in her remembrance. She saw the entrance to the little bed-room where she had slept with Dorothy; and further back the kitchen. She knocked on the door; once, twice, and yet again: no one answered.

"Perhaps she is in the kitchen," she thought, and stepped in still holding Kurt by the hand. She felt as much at home in the little house as though she had left it only a few weeks before.

She opened the kitchen-door softly. An old woman simply but neatly dressed sat by the hearth, so busily engaged with her sewing that she did not perceive Hilda, who stood for a minute in the doorway and observed her.

"She has a good, kind face," said Hilda to herself. "I feel as if I could trust her from my heart."

“Little mother!” she said aloud.

The woman raised her head from her work, and looking up with clear blue eyes, still undimmed by age, saw Hilda and Kurt.

“Who seeks me here in my loneliness?” she said. “What has brought you to me, children? Have you really come to see old Mother Dom-browsky?”

“To you surely, and no one else,” said Hilda. “And we bring you greetings from your son Michael.”

“From Michael, my dear son?” cried the old woman with delight, and dropped her work upon the floor. “Then I know you already. You are Hilda, and this is little Kurt! You are heartily welcome. May the dear God bless your in-coming!”

With these words she stood up and stretched out both her hands towards her guests.

“Yes, yes,” she said, after she had observed Hilda attentively. “I thought you would look so, child—so bright, so lovely and true-hearted. I

know your story already, for Michael wrote me a long letter telling me how he found you, and that he had advised you to come hither; and ever since I have wondered why you staid away so long. But now you are here at last, and must remain as long as my little cottage pleases you. I have long been ready for you; your bed-room is prepared, for Michael has impressed it upon me to take you in and treat you even as I would himself. I do it willingly from my own heart, for you must be a worthy maiden, and it will give the old woman much delight to have your bright young faces near her. Come then, let me take you to your room."

She moved about quite briskly, in spite of her age, and Hilda followed her, too much touched by her kindness to be able to speak. She had not looked for such a reception as this, and tears of happiness stood in her eyes as she entered the cheerful bed-room that had been prepared for her and Kurt. It was pure and clean, and quite simple. The bed was spread with a snowy

coverlet; table, chairs and bureau were scoured as white as the shining floor that glistened with fine sand, and dainty-looking curtains hung before the windows.

“Oh, how lovely and delicious it is here!” cried Hilda. “You are too good to us, dear Frau Dombrowsky.”

“I am glad you like it, my child,” said the old woman, “for then you will be content to stay with me. But we are not strangers to one another; I knew well the good old Dorothy, your nurse, and you, too, when you were so young that you cannot remember. So let me hear you call me Mother; it will please my old heart. Everything came back to my mind when I received Michael’s letter concerning you. Now make yourselves comfortable and at home, and I will bring you some refreshments; you must be tired and hungry.”

With these words she left the room with a quick step, and Hilda, overcome with happy emotion, burst into tears, and fell upon her

knees, offering thanks unto God, and praying him to bless the good people who had prepared this kindly shelter for the homeless ones. Kurt stood near, looking at her quite anxiously, and could not understand why his dear Hilda should cry.

"Why do you weep, dear, dear Hilda?" he said, stroking her wet cheeks with his little hands. "You frighten me."

"Oh, do not be afraid Kurt," she answered. "You must be glad with all your heart that the good God has led us hither. We have found a refuge at last, Kurt; a home. We need not wander around the world any longer. The kind Frau Dombrowsky is like a mother to us both. Oh, how thankful I am for the meeting with Michael, on that day that seemed to me so frightful, and yet was for us so full of future happiness! Surely we have found that God is with us everywhere, and when we seem most desolate and forsaken, he is still leading us in his own paths."

Frau Dombrowsky soon returned with bread,

butter and milk, and Hilda was surprised at the quickness of her movements.

“What troubles you, child?” she asked. Hilda sprang up and threw her arms around her.

“Not trouble, only happiness and thankfulness it is that makes me cry,” she said; “I will love and honor and bless you, my whole life long, dear mother.”

“Be calm, child, be quiet,” returned the worthy woman. “You are heartily welcome to me in my loneliness, and a comfort in my old age. I have missed my Michael much, since he went out into the world, and it seems now that the Lord has sent you purposely to make pleasant the evening of my life. Now rest you, child. Here is something to eat and drink; not much surely, but willingly given, and it will refresh you both.”

They ate and drank till they were satisfied. Hilda had never in her life felt so happy as now, in this simple little cottage where she received nothing but love and kindness. Kurt laughed and chattered, and was soon as much at home as

though he had lived all his life with Mother Dombrowsky; but as it grew dark, his eyelids began to droop, and Hilda undressed him and put him in the clean white bed, where he stretched out his limbs luxuriously, and had scarcely finished saying his short prayer before he was sound asleep.

“Now, my child,” said Frau Dombrowsky to Hilda, “now that the little one sleeps, we can have a quiet talk together. It is settled, of course, that your home shall always be with me, unless a better one is opened to you. If you have any plans for your future life, let me hear them: but always be sure that though I have not much goods in this world, yet, through Michael’s care, I have enough for you and the child and myself. But I know, too, from Michael’s letter, your circumstances, and what you would learn in this town. Years ago, while Dorothy yet lived, I thought there was some secret connected with your birth. It was a pity that she died so suddenly, without by a look or

word leaving any clue to the mystery. How shall we now learn who your parents were, and whether they are living or dead? I fear it will be difficult to obtain information of them, my child."

"Yes, I know that well," answered Hilda, "and I have not counted on success; but I will make all the inquiries and searches in my power, and leave the result in God's hands. If he wills that the secret of the past shall be discovered, he also will find ways and means to reveal it. But if not, then must I bow to his higher wisdom and judgment, and yield up my desire to raise the veil that rests over my early childhood. I am young and healthy, mother; I can work, and by my own industry earn the little that is necessary for Kurt and myself. It is a happy fortune for me that you have so kindly taken us in, and I can never express to you my gratitude for it. I feel as though at last I really had a home, and a friend; and on such a foundation surely, with God's help, we may build up a peaceful, quiet life."

“That is right, Hilda, quite right,” nodded the good old woman, well pleased. “I am rejoiced that you have not let your ideas soar too high in regard to this mystery, and have not encouraged hopes that might be disappointed. I have thought of you many times since Michael’s letter came, and silently but watchfully I have sought and listened that I might somewhere find a clue which we could follow up; but as yet all that concerns your birth is hidden in darkness and obscurity, and I cannot see one gleam of light. If only Dorothy still lived, and could speak! But, alas, she is dead, and I fear all that we wish to know is buried with her. I firmly believe, child, that you do not belong to the lower classes; but it is of no use to speculate over that, if we cannot bring the truth out of it. I know well that fourteen or fifteen years ago, strange and wicked things happened in Poland, and many rich and noble families were either extirpated or driven from the country; it could easily happen that you belong to one of those families, for the

old Dorothy did not come from this part of the world—of that I am certain. But now all the old stories are vague and indistinct. Grass has grown over them, and it would be hard work to dig through all the rubbish and reach the true foundation. However, you must do what seems best to you, and the dear God will decide the rest. God leadeth, and whatever may happen shall be according to his will. One can find happiness and contentment even in poverty—the happiness of a peaceful conscience. That will we seek, dear child, and, having found it, need trouble ourselves no further.

“And now tell me how you have prospered since my Michael left you, and why you have been so long on the way?”

Hilda related her experience since parting with Michael, its fortunes and misfortunes, and Frau Dombrowsky listened attentively.

“Yes, yes, things happen strangely in the world,” she said; “but, child, since you have been so successful as a singer, will you not again wish to go on the stage?”

“No, mother, surely not, if you will let me stay with you; I do not enjoy the life, and always shrink from appearing before the public. I long for a quiet, peaceful home, where I can provide for Kurt and myself by my own industry. To outsiders it looks very bright and beautiful upon the stage; but I have never found happiness there, and to Kurt’s poor father it brought but misery and grief. No, I would far rather stay with you.”

“That is right, quite right. I see you are brave, honest and true, my child;” and the old woman nodded her head, well pleased. “In my opinion a young girl should stay at home; and if you can only sew and embroider, work will not fail you. I know a great many people here in the town who will readily employ you on my recommendation.”

This promise the good woman fulfilled. Hilda, although but little accustomed to needlework, worked so industriously, and displayed such good taste, that she soon obtained as much as

she could accomplish. She earned enough to keep herself and Kurt from being a burden to Frau Dombrowsky. The quiet, natural and restful life she now led, after her many days of wandering, raised her spirits, and she was quite happy and contented.

Little Kurt, too, soon showed the benefit of the change; he grew prettier and brighter each day, and became Mother Dombrowsky's darling, as well as Hilda's.

"I cannot understand how his grandfather could turn away from him," said the old woman often to Hilda, as they watched the merry child playing on the square in front of the house. "One would think he might be thankful to God for giving him such a lovely child, instead of sending him from him. Well, Kurt will not trouble himself about it, at any rate."

Sometimes they talked of Hilda's old nurse, Dorothy, whose memory Hilda still kept lovingly in her heart.

"I know she died very suddenly," said Frau

Dombrowsky, "and it was very hard for you then; but I was so poor myself at the time, that I could do nothing for you. My Michael was not then in a position to care for his old mother, as he does now. But my heart bled when I saw you sent out into the world with the strange man. When you left, the house stood bare and empty, and I moved into it, because I could have it for a very low rent. I did not find much left of poor Dorothy's property; the officers had taken away everything of any value. Only a little old chest, with some toys and pieces of patch-work, stood forgotten in a corner of the kitchen. I found there was nothing of much account in it, and carried it up into the garret with other trumpery. Since then I have not thought of it."

"Do you not think we had better look into the chest?" asked Hilda, lightly.

"Oh, you would find nothing in it, dear child," said the woman. "It stands over behind the chimney. If there had been anything of value in it, I would have made use of it before now."

Hilda agreed with the old mother, and thought no more of the chest, but went upstairs to her room, singing happily to herself.

About two weeks after this, little Kurt, wandering idly about the house, was seized with the desire to look out upon the world from the windows in the garret; and without speaking to any one about it, stole up there by himself, and tumbled about in the dust and cobwebs for an hour or two. When he appeared before Hilda again, he looked so dirty from head to foot that she was frightened.

"Where have you been, Kurt?" she said to him. "Have you fallen down in the dirt, that you look so black? What would Mother Dombrowsky say, to see such a dirty little boy in her clean house? Come here quickly, and let me brush your clothes, and wash your face and hands."

Kurt came, laughing merrily. "I have been up in the garret, dear Hilda," he said, "and it is very dusty up there. It is no wonder my clothes

are soiled. But see what I have found! A little book, with pretty pictures in it."

He held it up as he spoke to Hilda. It was only an old, well-worn little book, with a cover that had once been black, but was now from dust and age quite gray, so that one could scarcely distinguish the gilt cross upon it.

Hilda leaned forward, and seized the book eagerly. "Oh, I remember it," she cried excitedly. "How often has my dear Dorothy read to me from it! It is her prayer-book, and there are many beautiful prayers in it. Where did you find it, Kurt?"

"In a little old chest, over behind the chimney," answered the boy. "It fell out as I knocked the chest, and as it opened I saw the pretty pictures in it, and brought it down to you."

"I am glad you found it, Kurt; it is a dear keepsake from my old nurse. She read much in it just before she died. Let me keep it, Kurt! I will take care of it, and will show you the pictures as often as you wish."

"Yes, keep it," said Kurt, "and here is something that belongs to it, too; it is a funny book, Hilda. See what a thick cover it has! I tried to bend it, and found another cover inside of this one, only thinner, and hard like iron; look at it, Hilda. It sprang out so quickly that it almost frightened me, and this paper fell out. I brought them to show you, and here they are. Isn't it a strange kind of a book?"

"Wonderful!" said Hilda to herself. "I do not understand this double cover. But let me see."

She took the papers from the child and cast a hastily glance over them, while an expression of the greatest amazement came into her face. A cry of astonishment broke from her lips, which brought Frau Dombrowsky hastily in from the kitchen, where she was busy.

"What has happened, my dear child?" she asked as she looked at Hilda, who was pale and trembling. "You frightened me. What is the matter?"

"Do not be alarmed," said Hilda, making an effort to recover herself. "It is nothing bad, dear mother. Only Kurt has found writings in this old prayer-book which seem to have reference to my parentage."

"Is it possible that it is God's will that the past should be revealed?" said Frau Dombrowsky, hardly less surprised than Hilda herself. "Show them to me! What do they say?"

"Here are some certificates; marriage and baptism certificates, and some pages written by Dorothy herself, as I can see at a hasty glance. And the papers are plainly addressed to me."

"Then read on, child; read further," urged Frau Dombrowsky. "I have never in my life been so surprised as I am at this minute."

Hilda hesitated; it seemed as if she almost feared the revelation that the papers would make. But in a few moments she raised her head, and said firmly, "Yes, we will read them. God has brought them out of the past into the light, and given them into my hands through

Kurt. I know it is the working of a divine Providence, and whatever the discovery may be, I must receive it with calmness and faith."

She came and stood beside Frau Dombrowsky at the window. Kurt was sent out to play, that they might be undisturbed, and Hilda unfolded the written pages which should disclose the story of her early life. In a low but clear voice she read as follows:

"*My Dear Hilda:* When this writing meets your eyes, I shall be no longer among the living. But I must fulfill a sacred duty, and write down that which will assist you once more to your true name and rightful property. You are too young to understand me if I should tell you now, therefore it is important to write it down that it may not be forgotten. If you live to grow up, and I am still with you, then will I repeat to you, and make every effort to legally prove these facts, that must have an influence over your whole future life. But if I die, and death may suddenly overtake me, then it will be

at least with the peaceful consciousness of having, as far as it was in my power, fulfilled my duty to you and your parents. So read these lines, knowing that they are the full and solemn truth.

“Your father was the Count Radziejewsky, a wealthy nobleman, who owned large properties in the neighborhood of Warsaw, and possessed a magnificent palace in Warsaw—your mother, born Countess Walewska, a noble lady, whom I served faithfully many years. I had lost my husband and a little daughter shortly after your birth, and your mother, knowing my fidelity and devotion to your whole family, chose me as your nurse.

“You had two brothers, Stanislaus and Joseph, the younger fourteen years older than yourself; and you soon became the darling of the whole family, especially of your mother, who with indescribable tenderness hung over her ‘little late rose,’ as she fondly called you. We resided then in Warsaw, for the Frau Countess feared that if

we lived out of town a physician could not be summoned quickly enough in case of sickness attacking you. Besides, those were times of wild excitement, and the Frau Countess felt the capital to be the place of greatest security.

“Several years passed; your mother and I did not trouble ourselves about what was happening abroad, for we found our entire happiness in caring for you. You were a brighter, more beautiful child than any I have ever seen. The Herr Count and his sons were passionately interested in the excitement that threatened to overthrow the whole country. It came at last to war with Russia. Poland had been so torn and trodden down with tyranny that they dared to throw off the yoke which the Fatherland had made so heavy. Kosciusko raised his standard, and troops poured in to aid him from all sides. Your father and brothers were among the foremost, although the Countess with prayers and tears begged them to remain at home. ‘The Fatherland shall give us freedom!’ was the an-

swer, as they left for the combat. Through what fearful days we lived then! With anxiety we waited daily for news from the battle-field. At first the Polish troops were victorious, but soon fortune turned against them, and one defeat followed another. Your brothers fell on the field of Mariejowice, and your father returned wounded from the battle-field, and hardly reached his palace before he was seized with a dreadful fever which threatened to end his life. The Frau Countess never left his bed-side. Thus at once we realized suddenly all the horrors of the war. The Russians stormed Prague, and pressed with victorious troops into Warsaw. I know only vaguely of the horrible deeds that took place there. I had no time to think of other sufferers and unfortunates, we were so pressed at home.

“One frightful day broke over us there. A wild, drunken crowd pressed with loud shouts and brandished weapons into the palace, knocked down and trampled on the faithful servants who tried to resist them, and spread themselves, plun-

dering and destroying, over the place. The Herr Count lay dying on his bed, and could not protect us. The Countess knelt in prayer beside him. With you in my arms, I stood trembling in an adjoining room. We had bolted and barred the doors, and hoped the crowd, satisfied with plunder and destruction, would soon leave the palace, when heavy blows sounded upon the doors; they cracked, and in another moment were violently burst open, and the roaring, raging crowd of madmen rushed into the chamber of the sick Count. With a shriek of despair that will forever ring in my ears, the Countess placed herself with outspread arms before the bed of her husband. Dazzled by her appearance, for one moment the throng stood still; then suddenly a shot struck her in the breast, and she sank to the floor. With the fury of wild animals they then fell upon the Count; ten strokes pierced through his body, and a sabre cut split open his head. Shuddering, I beheld the frightful scene from the next room; my

heart was broken with grief and terror. Then I thought of you, poor child! If they saw you, what would prevent them from sacrificing your innocent life to their fury? At any price you must be saved: and this idea brought back the strength to my feet, that seemed glued to the floor. Still were the dreadful men at their bloodshed by the bed of the Count. I softly closed the door, seized a little chest, which I knew contained important family papers, and fled away. Through many a room now deserted I hastened, shaking with fear, and succeeded in avoiding the infuriated mob, for there was nothing left for them to destroy or carry off. I reached unseen at last a secret passage, which led us to a place of security. In a sheltered spot we stayed several weeks in hiding. Only at night I left our place of concealment, and went in search of provisions; and crept in fear and trembling through the deserted chambers, where once so much happiness, luxury and love had reigned.

“But I knew we could not stay here, and that I must make some plan of escape. Flight—flight into another country—was my only thought. I still trembled for your safety. I feared if they discovered you they would put you to death, or cast you into prison. My mind, confused with horrors, saw nothing but frightful pictures—nothing but scenes of blood and murder. What should I do?—how get away? After much thought I determined to dress as a beggar, and as such wander with you through the country. People surely do not often molest the poor beggars. So I managed to arrange a shabby-looking set of clothes for you and myself, and concealed under them the family papers and the few valuables which I had been able to rescue from the general destruction. I left the palace with you at night. No obstacles stood in the way. All the doors and gates were either destroyed or stood wide open. Several dogs had made themselves comfortable in the lower apartments, and barked at us as we passed them.

Otherwise the place was still and silent as the grave. As I had hoped and expected, no one troubled themselves about us, two miserable-looking beggars. Without question or detention, we reached the suburbs, and now I turned to the right, towards the German border. It was a long, weary journey, but I found many kind country people who would sometimes carry us for miles in their wagons, and others who gave us a night's lodging, or a breakfast or supper. And although many may have guessed that we were refugees, we were allowed to go on our way; and, for the first time in many days, I began to breathe freely.

“Everything else was lost, but you at least, my dear nursling, were saved. That thought gave me strength to go on. I consecrated the remainder of my life to you, and left all else in the hands of the merciful God above, who rules the destinies of his children as a wise and tender Father. I did not wish to travel too far from the border of your native land, for I still cher-

ished the hope that you would some day return to it, and take possession of your large and powerful inheritance there. Therefore I stayed in the little town of Gerschowetz, and God has enabled me to keep want and suffering away from your dear head. May he protect us still further, and restore you at last to your home and rights!

“In the secret inner cover of the prayer-book, which I will show you when it is time, you will find all the necessary legal papers relating to your birth. The certificates, which I fortunately saved from destruction, prove undoubtedly that you are the Countess Hilda Sophia Radziejewska; and if justice and right again triumph, then must you certainly take possession of the rich inheritance of your unfortunate parents. That heaven will help you, poor lonely orphan child, is the earnest prayer of your faithful, loving Anna Dorothy Januschka.”

Here the writing ended, and with tears in her eyes, speechless and grieved, Hilda laid it on the

table. Her heart was full. The sad fate of her parents had deeply moved her, and she thought only of them in this moment.

Frau Dombrowsky too was silent, thinking over the great discovery.

“Well,” she said at last, “I am not really very much surprised at this revelation, for I have always thought the mystery was something of that kind. You are surely a Countess, and a very wealthy Countess, as Dorothy has written; and the only question is whether your powerful name and your rightful claim can be carried into effect.”

“Oh, mother, I cannot think of that yet,” said Hilda. “Truly I have the right to bear my parents’ name, and would be quite satisfied if they would restore to me as much of the family property as would repay your goodness, love and faithfulness, if such things ever could be repaid — but I doubt very much that this will happen.”

“No one can tell, my child; we do not know,”

said Frau Dombrowsky. "Since that wild time, things have become very different in Poland; and who knows?—if the case is legally commenced, surely the voice of justice and truth must have power. If the papers are all in order, and if it can be proved that Count Radziejewska really was your father we will at least make the attempt."

Hilda looked through the papers, and found everything in perfect form. The papers were witnessed and signed by a lawyer in Gerschowetz, in which Frau Dorothy declared on oath, that her foster-child, Hilda, was the legitimate daughter and only living child of the deceased Count Clement Radziejewska, of Warsaw, and his wife, Countess Hilda Walewska.

"Now, that must be all correct," said Frau Dombrowsky. "We women do not understand much of business; but I know a lawyer, an honest, skillful man, for whom I did washing some years ago. I will go to him, and lay the matter before him. What he advises, child, we will do, for he will surely tell us what is best."

Hilda agreed willingly to this proposition, although she hoped little from these steps. It seemed to her quite impossible that she, the poor homeless waif, the charity child of her nurse, the traveling singer, the penniless beggar, could ever be raised to the position of a rich and noble Countess.

But Frau Dombrowsky set to work resolutely, and without delay; she dressed herself, and took the various documents, and gave them herself to the son of the lawyer. She remained away some time, but when at length she returned, her good honest countenance beamed with delight, and she clasped Hilda warmly in her arms.

"All goes well," she said. "Herr Lavenburg is coming to see you himself, and he will give you only favorable reports. I sincerely hope you will come into your rights, my child: then you will be a noble, wealthy lady. You have honestly deserved it, if it were only for your goodness to the little fellow there. And how wonderfully it happens! Without Kurt, the secret

might still have been lying hidden in the little old chest. Who could have guessed that the shabby prayer-book could make such surprising disclosures? We might never have discovered it, and only the child playing on the floor must find the prayer-book, and even the secret pocket. Truly, it was an especial providence of God. He leadeth all to work out his wise purposes, and has made the boy, to whom you have been so good, become the instrument of your fortune. For I doubt not that this great fortune will fall into your hands."

"As it pleases God," said Hilda humbly. "I have trusted him in poverty and distress, and have always found strength and faith in answer to my prayers. I will believe still further that he will lead me into the paths that he deems best. If I must still remain poor, yet am I now happy; and if riches come to me, I will strive with his grace to worthily employ them."

"Amen, dear child, amen!" said Frau Dombrowsky devoutly. "Truly you deserve that

fortune shall fall to your share in this world. But in that world which knows no rank and earthly treasure, you will surely be blessed with an everlasting blessedness!"

CHAPTER VIII.

“ I WILL REPAY,” SAITH THE LORD.

THE same day, a few hours later, the advocate sought the little house of Frau Dombrowsky, and greeted Hilda as reverentially as though she were already in actual possession of her inheritance. He was a pleasant, kindly man, with an open countenance, and keen eyes which seemed accustomed to look through all things to the foundation. “ My dear Fraulein,” he said to Hilda, “ your claims to the name and estates of your deceased parents are without doubt valid. These papers agree with each other, as the members of a closely-linked chain, and what information is still wanting, can without trouble be obtained. Only one thing is lacking, and that is surely very necessary—miserable money ; without this it is difficult to make good a claim so distant as the property of your family in Poland. Do you possess nothing of value that

we can turn into money? Or have you a friend who feels interest enough in you to lend you the sum? His money would be perfectly safe, for with the assistance of a couple of thousand dollars, we could without difficulty establish your claim to an estate worth much more than a hundred times that. Think, Fraulein."

Hilda shook her head with a faint smile. "A couple of thousand dollars! what a sum!" she said. "I have not a friend who could lend me the tenth of that."

"That is bad," said the lawyer, "And I am not rich enough to help you, or I would gladly do so; my practice is only sufficient to provide for my household. However, we must see what can be done. The affair is too important to be easily dropped. We must make every effort to succeed in a case on which so much depends. I will look about myself. Perhaps if we can convince one of the certainty of the claim and its success, some business man might be induced to venture the sum. We must see; we must see.

At any rate, I will first write to a colleague in Warsaw, and get his opinion of it. He may be able to advise me as to what steps to take. Money, money, pitiful money, where shall we find you?"

"If things were as they should be," here put in Frau Dombrowsky, "money would not be wanting."

"How so, Frau; how so?" asked the lawyer.

"Well, then," said the woman, "do you see that little fellow?" pointing to Kurt, who was bounding about in the square with his ball. "His grandfather is a wealthy man, and if he had but a spark of feeling, he would be ready to encase our Hilda in fine gold. But alas! money is thrown away there."

"The boy—what is he to the Fraulein here?" asked the lawyer.

Hilda wished Frau Dombrowsky to say no more of her kindness to Kurt; but the old woman would not be silent. She related the whole story of Hilda and the child, and the

lawyer listened sympathetically. As the name of the Baron Semberg was mentioned he opened his lips, and seemed about to interrupt the narrative; but he restrained himself, and let her proceed with the story. Then he arose, and walked up and down the room in much excitement. "Here indeed is God's finger," he cried. "Fraulein Hilda, can you prove that this boy is the grandchild of the old Baron Semberg?"

"Certainly; I have all the necessary papers to confirm it," replied Hilda.

"I pray you show them to me."

Hilda took the packet from a drawer in her bureau, and handed it to the lawyer, who examined the papers with the closest scrutiny. As he did so his eyes shone brighter and brighter, and at last he cried out delightedly: "It is enough. Fraulein Hilda I have good news to impart to you, and this will also have an important influence on the development of your own affairs. Look at the little one out there, to whom you have been a mother. He is no

longer a little waif dependent on the charity of others; for his grandfather has been dead for some time, and has left no other heirs than this child of his only son. To him, therefore, descends the whole of his grandfather's property, and I think it will not be a hard matter to borrow from this inheritance the little sum that is necessary to firmly establish your own rights. The strictest guardian would not be able to refuse you, the tender, faithful friend and protectress of the boy, this small and reasonable amount. Wonderful! we cannot help seeing how wisely God rules the destinies of his children."

Hilda and Frau Dombrowsky sat speechless and staring at this information, which opened a way out of the difficulty. They were utterly astonished.

"But how do you know all this to be true?" at length stammered Hilda.

"That is easily explained, my dear Fraulein," answered the lawyer. "I read it in the *Gazette*;

for six weeks an advertisement has appeared in its columns, in which the young lady who brought the child to his grandfather is requested to come forward or to send her address to the trustees of the estate of the Baron Semberg. The sudden death of the old Baron, and a description of the child and the young girl, I read in the papers. In several other newspapers the same advertisement has appeared, but none of us guessed that it was you, Fraulein, whom they sought. Probably you do not read the papers, and so, it happened quite simply and naturally that this should be your first intimation of little Kurt's good fortune. Wonderfully has God woven together the threads of your destinies! Wonderfully has he led you into a path of light! Without your faithful, self-sacrificing love, the boy would perhaps never have reached this inheritance, and in return the child is made the instrument by which you also are restored to name and fortune. Who will not acknowledge God's finger here, must indeed wilfully shut his eyes to the divine mercy."

"Yes, truly," cried the good Frau Dombrowsky, clasping Hilda in her arms. "Be happy, my dear child! God is rewarding you as you deserve; even if your hopes be not fulfilled in Poland, there is surely a home for your nursling. This is very fortunate for you and Kurt."

"Is it possible? Can it be really true?" asked Hilda, completely overwhelmed with the important news crowded so fast upon her. "I can scarcely believe that these things will really happen."

"Take my word for it," said the lawyer, "and for the rest I will send you the *Gazette* containing the notice. There is no mistake about it. I am sure in this case. Now, the next question is, what shall we do first? Let me have these papers that relate to Kurt, my dear Fraulein; I will have them copied, and will keep you advised of my movements. It will be necessary for the court to appoint a guardian for Kurt, and I know that, in consideration of all the circumstances, they will not attempt to separate you

and the child. You seem to belong to each other. There will be nothing of especial importance beside this. I will write to my partner in Warsaw, and doubt not that affairs will very soon be brought to a satisfactory termination. Accept my hearty good wishes, Fraulein; I rejoice that heaven has so surely and abundantly rewarded virtue."

"Oh no," said Hilda earnestly. "It is not a reward; only gracious and undeserved goodness from our kind Father! I am deeply grateful that he has provided for little Kurt. Whatever happens to me, I shall still be so happy over the child's good fortune that I am more than rewarded for all that my feeble strength has been able to do for him. It has been indeed but little."

"You will soon hear from me again, Fraulein, and good news, I hope," said the lawyer as he took up his hat. "The way appears to be favorably opened, and should any obstacles even now show themselves, we will find means to

overcome them. Meanwhile, I will without delay employ myself in your interest."

He went, and left Hilda alone with Frau Dombrowsky; both were much agitated by the sudden clearing up of the hitherto dark and impenetrable mystery, and it was some time before they recovered their usual composure. Hilda seemed more pleased at Kurt's good fortune than over the prospects that had been opened to her.

"Not yet," she said, as Frau Dombrowsky congratulated her. "I cannot rejoice over it yet. The story of the frightful death of my poor parents, whom I cannot remember, has deeply grieved me. Can wealth and rank really make one happy? What is it to me that I come into possession of their property without their dear love and guidance? I would give it all up willingly if I could restore them to life. But that is impossible, and I must submit patiently to the will of God, and be thankful for the mercy that has bestowed upon us so many comforts and

blessings. I will still be Kurt's loving sister. The dear child! He plays on in the sand, all unconscious of the gifts that God has showered upon him. Come hither, Kurt; come to me, my child!"

The merry boy came bounding towards her, for Hilda's voice always possessed a charm for him beyond everything else. "What shall I do for you, dear Hilda?" he asked, looking lovingly up into her face.

"You shall listen, my dear boy, to what the good God has done for you," answered Hilda. "You are no longer a poor boy, Kurt, but are rich, and in the future will live in the beautiful castle where we sought your grandfather."

"I will not stay there, Hilda; I will not live in that castle. I do not care to be rich; I would rather stay with you always," answered the boy excitedly, and clung fast to Hilda's arm. "If I have you, I am rich enough."

"Well, then I will go with you," said Hilda, smiling down on him.

"Oh yes, then I will go to the castle," cried Kurt warmly.

"And you will be able to do much good with your wealth, dear Kurt. You can make poor children, and poor men and women, and sick people who have no money, happy and comfortable. Would you not gladly be rich to do that?"

"Oh yes, dear Hilda, I will do anything you wish," answered the boy, smiling happily again, now that the danger of being separated from his beloved Hilda was over.

"Then, dear, try to use your inheritance for the good of the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. That will be the best thank-offering you can bring to God for his great goodness."

"Yes, I will, dear Hilda," said the boy. "But you must help me; will you not?"

"Yes, indeed I will," said Hilda; "and God grant that we may never grow weary of doing good, and deserving his grace."

In about two weeks news came from Poland

and Silesia, which the lawyer hastened to impart to Hilda.

"In Kurt's affairs everything is in legal order," he said; "his claims are acknowledged, and the guardian appointed by the court has consented that he shall remain with you, Fraulein. An ample sum yearly has been provided for his maintenance and education, which you will receive through my hands, as you wish it. Naturally, we will first attend to his wardrobe and board, and other things we can think of later. So this is very clear and simple; but I do not understand the letter which I have just received from my partner in Warsaw. He writes me thus: 'You will soon receive verbal information. I pray you, have patience for only a few days.' Whether my friend means to come here himself, or to send some one, I cannot comprehend."

"We must patiently wait," said Hilda. "I am glad that Kurt's affairs are settled. He can now have a good education. The thought of this has given me much anxiety. Now I am freed from

that care, and my heart is light. I can easily wait for what concerns me."

Several more days passed without bringing further news from Warsaw. One afternoon a handsome traveling carriage, drawn by four horses, drew up before the little cottage of Frau Dombrowsky, and that worthy woman perceived with astonishment her old friend the lawyer spring out, and then carefully assist an elderly lady to alight. Her gentle, high-bred countenance still bore traces of great beauty, and Hilda, who sat by the window with her sewing, felt her heart beat violently as she looked at the sweet face. The door stood open; the lady entered hastily, and her glance sought Hilda with an expression of infinite love. Tears flowed from her eyes; she opened her arms, and in a broken voice cried: "My child, my daughter; come to the heart of your happy mother!"

Like lightning the truth flashed into Hilda's mind. This was her mother; she lived. She had come to seek her child. She loved her

child. Hilda swayed helplessly in the chair; but only for a moment. With a great effort she recovered herself.

“My mother!” she cried in a tone of indescribable rapture, and felt herself clasped in her mother’s arms, and received her kisses on lips and cheeks and brow. She raised her head and they looked into each other’s faces and smiled, and then wept in the first excess of joy.

Later, came questions and explanations. The mother lived, and yet Dorothy had seen her fall, bathed in blood. But her wound had not been a fatal one, and she lay on the floor in a swoon, until a faithful servant, stealing back after the mob had left, had found her and borne her away to an humble cottage, where he and his wife nursed her through a long sickness; but her life since had been passed in the deepest sadness. She believed her child dead, and also her faithful Dorothy, for she could discover no trace of either. The most careful search had been made, but no clue could be found; and after every possible effort proved

fruitless, the poor mother at last yielded to her fate, and for many years mourned the loss of her daughter, and refused to be comforted.

By a state decree, the Countess had since then received her estates, but the restored wealth could not fill up the emptiness of her heart, or drive away her grief. Lonely and sorrowful she lived in the palace at Warsaw, until on one never-to-be-forgotten joyful day she received tidings that her child still lived. She could not doubt, for the faithful old Dorothy's letter made all clear. Instantly she gave orders to prepare for a journey, but the sudden joy had been too much for her frail strength to bear.

“I broke down,” she said in relating the story, “and it was several days before I could recover sufficient strength to bear the journey; then, restless and impatient, I traveled day and night until I found you, my darling child, and this hour of meeting has swallowed up all the bitterness of the past sad days. Oh, my child, I can never thank God enough for the happiness he has given me in finding you again.”

It would be vain to attempt to describe Hilda's happiness. She was repaid for all her faithfulness, for all she too had suffered. And a rich reward was hers. God had repaid her a thousand-fold for her self-sacrificing kindness to little Kurt. She had been a mother to him; and, behold, through him God had restored her own mother. Her heart had not longed for rank or wealth, but for a mother's love; and with an overflowing tenderness it came to her, a blessed foretaste of a joyous, peaceful future.

She was happy, and happy would she render all who had shown kindness to her when she, poor and friendless, a homeless waif, had wandered abroad in the world.

She would not be separated from Kurt nor from the worthy Frau Dombrowsky, and she begged permission from Kurt's guardian to oversee his education; so they lived as a united family, now in Poland, now in Silesia; and many were the blessings which Hilda with full hands scattered around her. The honest Michael Dombrowsky

became the master of her stables, and lived with his mother in a little cottage on the estate. Frau Kinsky received, quite unexpectedly, a handsome present and a grateful letter from Hilda, which she kept among her dearest treasures. Hilda sought in vain for information of Jonathan. The vague reports that came to her about him told a story of poverty and distress. She forgave him all the wrongs of former days, and would gladly have assisted him had it been in her power.

We have reached the end, and we leave Hilda in the sunshine of a happy life, still trusting in God's wisdom and love. Let us too have faith, dear friends, for he leadeth us also through shadow and light, as a kind Father who knoweth what is best for his children.

THE END.





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